インテリビレッジの座敷童（ざしきわらし）

4

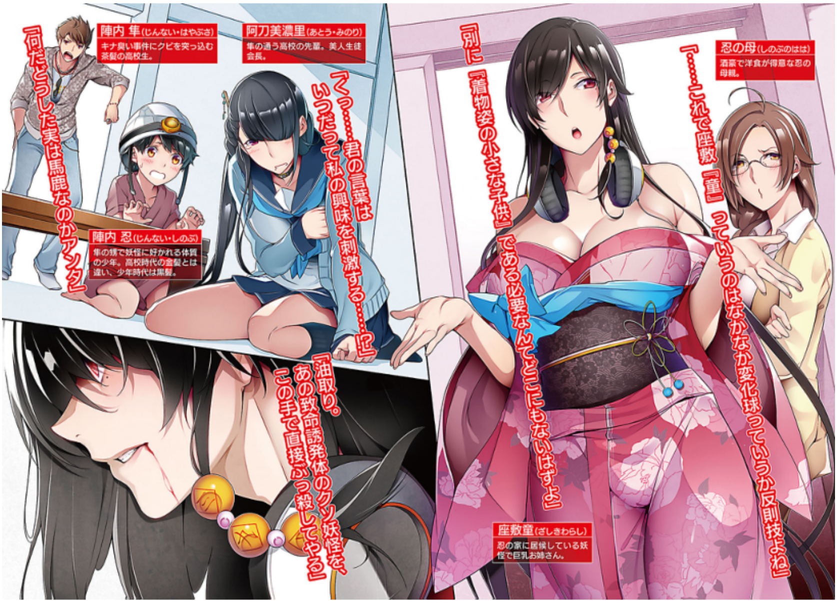
鎌池和馬

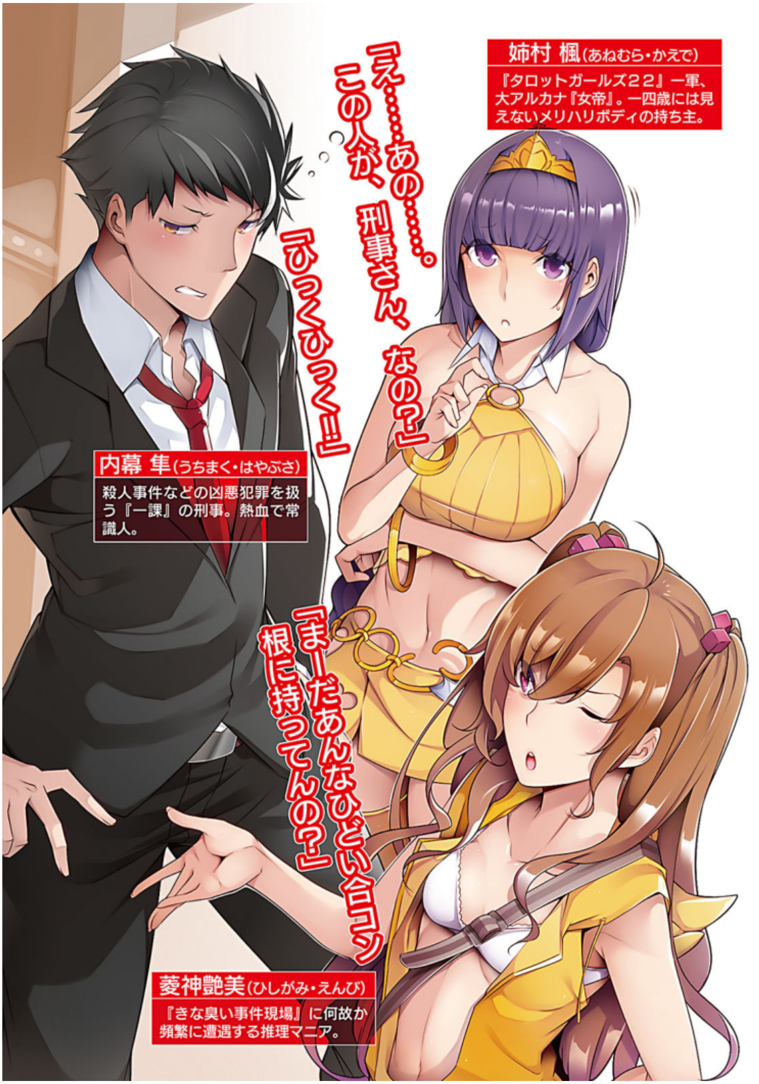
イラスト／真早

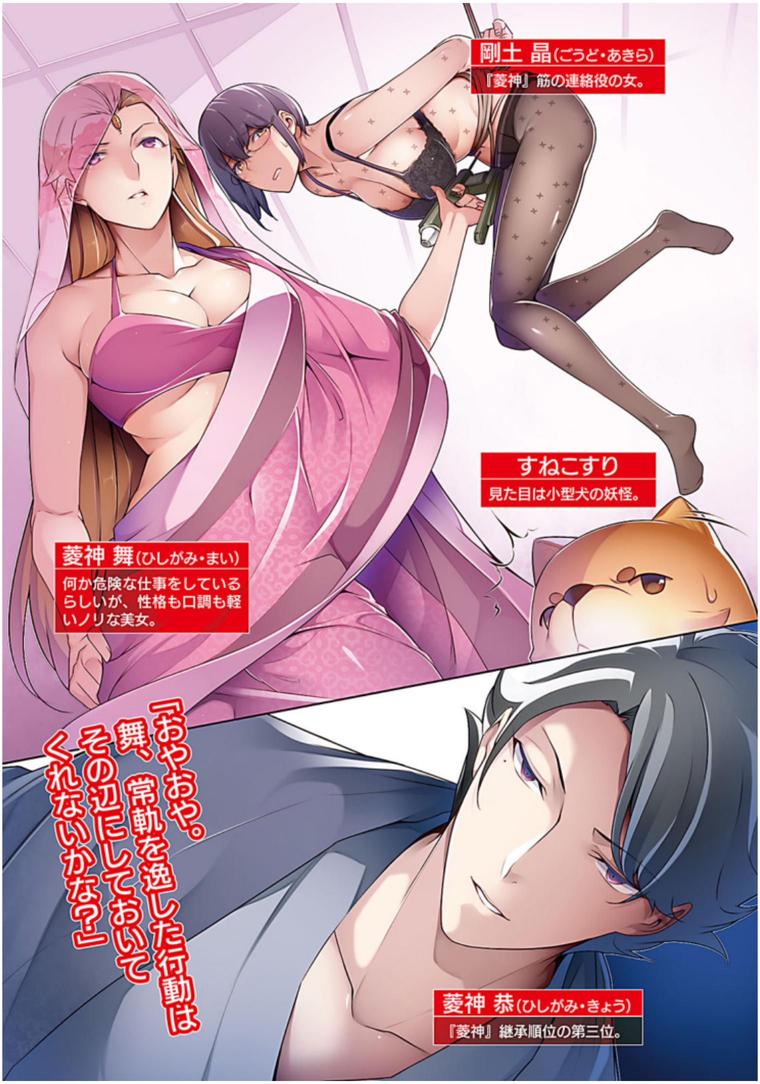
電撃文庫

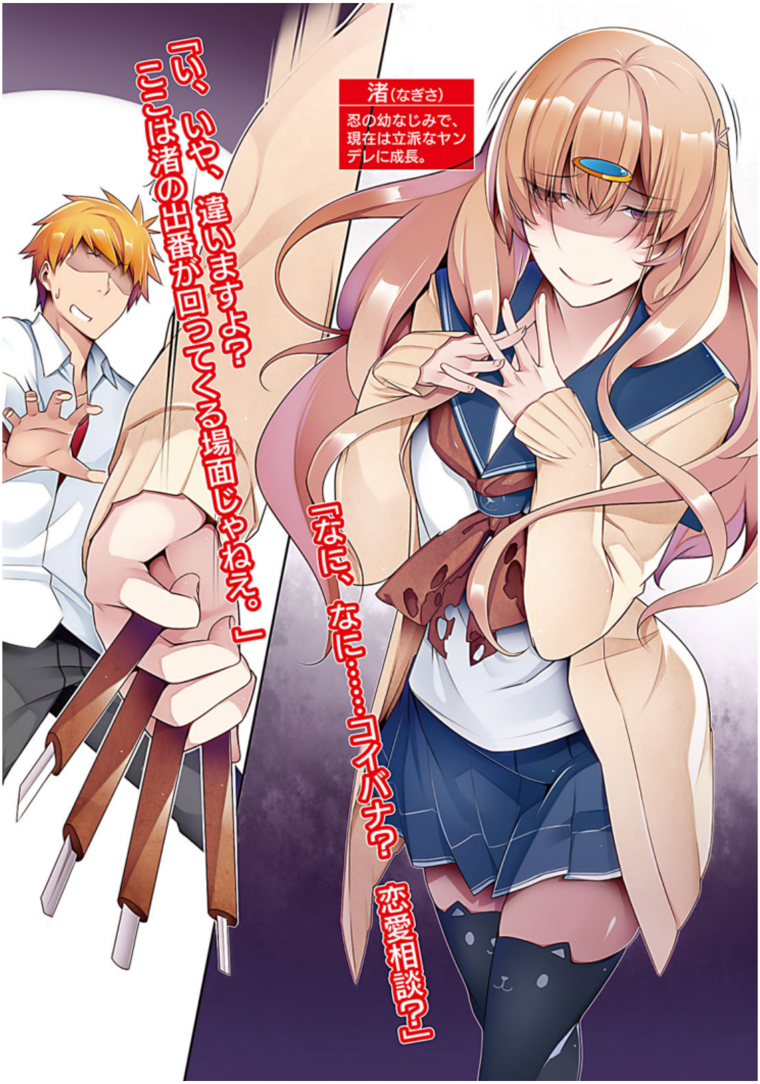
インテリビレッジの
座敷童④

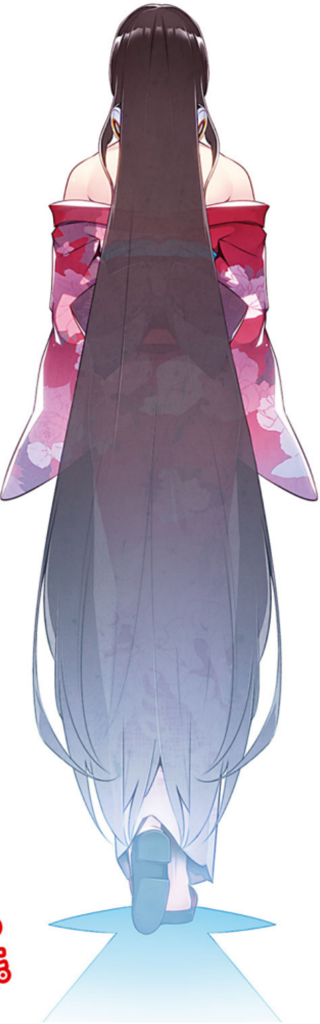
鎌池和馬　イラスト／真早


忍の母（しのぶのはは）
酒豪で洋食が得意な忍の母親。
「……これで座敷『童』っていうのはなかなか変化球っていうか反則技よね」
「別に『着物姿の小さな子供』である必要なんてどこにもないはずよ」
座敷童（ざしきわらし）
忍の家に居候している妖怪で巨乳お姉さん。
「くっ……君の言葉はいつだって私の興味を刺激する……⁉」
阿刀美濃里（あとう・みのり）
隼の通う高校の先輩。美人生徒会長。
「油取り。あの致命誘発体のクソ妖怪を、この手で直接ぶっ殺してやる」
陣内 隼（じんない・はやぶさ）
キナ臭い事件にクビを突っ込む茶髪の高校生。
「何だどうした実は馬鹿なのかアンタ」
陣内 忍（じんない・しのぶ）
隼の甥で妖怪に好かれる体質の少年。高校時代の金髪とは違い、少年時代は黒髪。


姉村 楓（あねむら・かえで）
『タロットガールズ２２』一軍、大アルカナ『女帝』。一四歳には見えないメリハリボディの持ち主。
「え……あの……。この人が、刑事さん、なの？」
「ひっくひっく！！」
内幕 隼（うちまく・はやぶさ）
殺人事件などの凶悪犯罪を扱う『一課』の刑事。熱血で常識人。
「まーだあんなひどい合コン根に持ってんの？」
菱神艶美（ひしがみ・えんび）
『きな臭い事件現場』に何故か頻繁に遭遇する推理マニア。


剛土 晶（ごうど・あきら）
『菱神』筋の連絡役の女。
すねこすり
見た目は小型犬の妖怪。
菱神 舞（ひしがみ・まい）
何か危険な仕事をしているらしいが、性格も口調も軽いノリな美女。
「おやおや。舞、常軌を逸した行動はその辺にしておいてくれないかな？」
菱神 恭（ひしがみ・きょう）
『菱神』継承順位の第三位。


渚（なぎさ）
忍の幼なじみで、現在は立派なヤンデレに成長。
「なに、なに……コイバナ？恋愛相談？」
「い、いや、違いますよ？ここは渚の出番が回ってくる場面じゃねえ。」



そして。赤い浴衣の座敷童は、突如としてどこかへ消えてしまった。

もくじ

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ぷいっ
うふふ
呼んだ忍ちゃん？

デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）

インテリビレッジの
座敷童④

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

「電撃文庫MAGAZINE Vol.35」掲載・扉イラスト

「電撃文庫MAGAZINE Vol.36」掲載・扉イラスト

「電撃文庫MAGAZINE Vol.37」掲載・扉イラスト

Chapter 1: Zashiki Warashi Yukari / The Past is a Present that Once Was

Part 1

March 24, 5:00 AM.

I was napping and not sure if I was experiencing a dream or reality.

My mind had fallen to an odd level not quite awake and not quite asleep. In that state, I suddenly felt a sensation seeping out from my chest. It was as if some kind of barrier had grown weak.

Something was clearly wrong.

From the top of my head to the end of my butt, I felt something like thin, thin wires passing through the center of my body.

They were not sturdy or strong. In fact, they felt like they would break like dry pasta if I twisted my body even slightly. Nevertheless, I felt a vague chill of unease as if letting those sharp fragments spread through my body would be a fatal mistake.

At that time, it came clearly to my mind.

Ahh. I'm definitely not a normal Zashiki Warashi.

National Registry ID #36110054Ra2.

XXXXX Prototype Ver. 39 XXX.

Traditional Species Designator: Zashiki Warashi.

Personal Name within the Jinnai Family: Yukari.

There were a lot of terms that could refer to me, but not even I knew which one truly indicated "me". Even if there was a "me" I wanted to be, the truth of the world would not necessarily take my side so conveniently.

As I thought on my vague definition of myself, the sense that something was wrong travelled down my back.

The thin wire-like sensation seemed to say it was the only thing on which I could rely to identify who I really was.

"…"

Even sighing seemed like too much trouble, so I closed my eyes once more within the thick futon blanket.

This was a thought pattern that only existed in this vague level of consciousness.

It was a fluctuation.

An error.

Once I clearly woke or clearly fell asleep, this unease would vanish. And I hated putting in any kind of effort, so going back to sleep was always the way to go.

Or so I thought.

Another action interfered with my meager plan.

Something began rustling around next to me in the futon.

“Yukari.”

I heard a small child’s voice and a boy’s head popped out from under the blanket.

He was about six and had short, black hair.

His face was as red as a boiled octopus as he spoke.

“It’s hot and hard to breath.”

“That’s what you get for pulling such a thick blanket over your head.”

He was well-known for tossing and turning in his sleep, so his pillow had been thrown to the other end of the bedroom. And it was not the work of a Makura-Gaeshi.

If he had woken up, going back to sleep would be difficult.

I rolled over to check the digital clock and found ten minutes had passed since I had last checked.

The rectangular clock was not my taste.

In fact, the futon itself was not mine.

Sneaking into the family's futons at night is a trait of the Zashiki Warashi, isn't it?

I rubbed my eyes, gave a quick yawn, and spoke to the actual owner of the futon.

"Good morning, Shinobu. I'd like to change, so could you scoot back just a bit?"

Part 2

“Bust: 98 cm. Waist: 54 cm. Hip: 85 cm. Isn’t it a bit of a curveball to call this a Zashiki ‘Warashi’?[1] In fact, it’s downright cheating.”

I was inside a large thatch-roof house.

When I lazily made my way to the altar room, I found Shinobu’s mother waiting for me. As Youkai did not have lifespans, it could be hard to judge our ages once we passed our growth period, but it was true I would likely be categorized as a “young wife” using their standards.

Also, there was only one thing I could say to the words thrown at me the instant I opened the door.

“I’m not sure what you want me to do about it.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“And another thing. The Zashiki Warashi species also contains young samurai and one-legged monks. It doesn’t have to be a small child wearing a kimono.”

“Sure, sure. Now, how’s Shinobu doing?”

“He insisted he could change on his own, so I’m betting he has his head stuck in the neck hole while he flails around like a giant stuffed amoeba.”

“Did he wet the bed?”

“If he had, I would look a lot more upset right now.”

“It’s my mother-in-law who would be upset since she uses you as a dress-up doll. There aren’t many people who wear kimonos.”

“Then why don’t you wear them?”

By the way, she was in the altar room in order to bring me my breakfast.

In the Jinnai house, the humans ate in the living room and the Youkai ate in the altar room. It was a fairly lax rule, so there was no restriction on switching location after the meal actually began.

After setting down the food and placing a bowl of rice in front of the Buddhist altar, Shinobu's mother waved at me.

"Okay, enjoy yourself. And make sure you bring fortune and prosperity to our house like a Zashiki Warashi is supposed to☆"

After making sure she had left the room, I sat in a daze for a while. Rather than wanting to sleep but finding I couldn't, I knew I had to wake up but found doing so was too much trouble.

I decided to switch on the flat-screen TV in a corner of the room and flipped randomly through the channels while I waited for my mind to awaken. Hunger really seemed to play a large role as a mental support.

"Here is the number one for today, March 24! If you're an Aries, listen up! Your perfect match is a Virgo! And your lucky color is…"

"Here is today's selected best seller. 'The Nail that Sticks Out is Hammered Down ~How to Create a Society where only Idiots can Survive~' This is the latest novel from the author of 'The Idiots whose Names Deserve to Go Down in History'! It far outdoes its predecessor which was famous for readers having such extremely divided opinions of it that they got into actual fistfights."

"Beauty! This will be the three-minute exercise for the morning. If you want to smile below the summer sun, you have to put in the effort now! This is the perfect exercise for you piglets who are afraid to look in the mirror."

" 'People are Killed for Such Stupid Reasons ~Selfish Motives Straight from the Murderer's Mouth~' This week's special drama is the ninth entry in the series of true stories that reveal the mysteries behind brutal crimes that will freeze your blood! Don't miss it Friday night at nine!"

Just as I thought I would remember that my stomach was empty after another fifteen minutes, I heard a sound.

It sounded like dishes clinking together.

I quickly realized it did not just "sound like" that.

"Yukari, Yukari. You can't eat alone."

"Shinobu?"

The six-year-old child carried a tray with unsteady hands that pushed the danger meter up to 130%. It seemed he had taken it all the way to the altar room.

“They said on TV that food tastes better when everyone’s together.”

“Shinobu, you’re kind of missing the point and you’re also spilling miso soup at a concerning rate.”

“Yukari! Don’t eat alone.”

I was forced to grab a rag and put in the manual labor to fix a disaster that would delight only a tatami mat craftsman.

He seemed to think I was on the verge of becoming a shut-in, but that was just how Zashiki Warashi were. It was just as pointless to urge a bat or mole to sunbathe.

At any rate, I left the TV on while eating breakfast with Shinobu whose misunderstanding remained.

“Grandma’s food is good, but it’s all so brown.”

“Well, she prefers Japanese food while your mother goes more for the Western food.”

“Grandma should just make omurice too. That would add a bunch of yellow and red! And if she added parsley, it’d have green too!!”

He pouted his lips as he complained, but it was interesting to note that he finished his vegetables more often when his grandmother made the food.

Making a six-year-old child eat his vegetables seemed like a good indicator of skill to me.

“I can eat bell peppers.”

“Oh, can you?”

“I can eat celery too.”

“Personally, I’d much rather not.”

I refused to eat celery on principle, so I turned down his persistent sales talk about adding mayonnaise. His small hands then made an odd movement.

He pulled out several metal skewers divided into different bright colors.

“Um…Shinobu? What are those?”

“You don’t know? Beauty!!”

I had a feeling I had heard that word on TV earlier and he stuck the colored skewers into his boiled eggplant and taro.

“You can go on a diet by stabbing these into the food before eating it!”

“Um, a diet?”

A six year old on a diet?

“This one’s for meat and this one’s for fish. You only get one or the other of those, though. This is for green vegetables, this is for red vegetables, and this is for yellow vegetables!!”

“Oh, I get it. It has a lot more skewers for vegetables, so if you use them evenly, you’ll naturally get the vegetables you need.”

“Beauty said it. Beauty said it on TV, so it has to be true!”

I then recalled that effeminate male TV personality whose hair was dyed a bright color.

He was known as a fashion leader and the one who started the latest diet boom, but for some reason no one actually wanted to be just like him. It seemed like an odd position to me.

“If you diet, you’ll get big and strong. Big and strong!”

“Shinobu, you have the entire concept wrong and I’m afraid you’ll get the skewer stuck in your throat, so stop sticking it in your mouth to eat from it. Bite the food off the side instead.”

So are these colorful skewers an official product?

I doubted there was a specialized shop in the rural area, so someone in the family had to have bought them off the internet. The biggest suspect was Shinobu’s mother. She had a bad habit of buying things on a whim and then only using them once. The porcelain bibimbap dish set and the home-made southern rice cracker set were two of the latest ones.

“Yukari, did you know that ikra is Russian for roe?”

“You sure are knowledgeable.”

“Priozhki!”

“Although maybe your knowledge wouldn’t be so strange if we didn’t have all those cable channels.”

Part 3

No major incidents would happen.

There were no real ups or downs.

The job of a Zashiki Warashi was to laze around a large rural house, so I only had to find a spot that wouldn't get in the way of the vacuuming and lie on the tatami mats. I was in a carefree mood far removed from my past of being imprisoned and experimented on by the organization named Hyakki Yakou.

Or so I had hoped. Unfortunately, I heard a commotion out front.

As usual, it was Shinobu's voice.

I circled around to the front entrance, put on my geta, and went outside. There, I found Shinobu having a small disagreement on the road in front of the house.

His opponent was…something. It was a giant three-eyed dog the size of a small truck and it was cutting across the road to block the way.

"I am a Nurikabe and I will not let you through."

"Why!? Why won't you!?"

"If you are going somewhere, you must have an adult with you. Go call someone."

"You stupid Youkai. I bet you're called a Roadblock or something!"

"I am a Nurikabe. I already explained that. Now go call for an adult."

Shinobu grabbed the thick fur on the gigantic dog's side and tugged, but it did not seem to bother the Nurikabe.

The Youkai was as harmless as it looked, but I had heard of them having a serious effect on the domestic economy when they appeared on a highway or railroad. Youkai like us wouldn't be harmed by having a dump truck run into us or a tanker truck explode on us, so there was not much the humans could do.

However, I had thought a Nurikabe looked like a large hunk of konjac with short arms and legs.

Letting this continue forever would help nothing, so I decided to call out to Shinobu.

“Shinobu, what are you doing?”

“School! I’m gonna go to school!”

He swung his arms around to try to persuade me.

“I’m starting school in the spring, so I need to make sure I know the way!”

Meanwhile, the Nurikabe glanced over at me with its three eyes and slowly vanished as if dissolving into the air.

“Ah, the Roadblock went away! Okay, let’s go!!”

“Shinobu.”

He looked like he was about to run off and not stop until he was on the moon or something, so I lightly grabbed onto the nape of his neck to stop him.

“Do you even know where your school is?”

“I’ll let you join my exploration party. You should be thankful.”

If I refused, he would probably get lost on his own and manage to escape the Solar System, so I had no choice but to go along.

It was the morning during late March.

The weather was in a bizarre state where the temperature would change quite a bit each day, but it was fairly warm on this day. It was also sunny and there were even butterflies flying around after waking up too early.

“The trees are wearing scarves.”

“Those are made of straw.”

“They must really not like the cold. It’s so warm today.”

I decided to keep it a secret that they were put up to allow bugs to nest in them and then burned to kill the bugs gathered inside.

Meanwhile, Shinobu was looking around in confusion.

“This is tricky,” he said while forcing a knowledgeable look. “Finding your way without landmarks is tricky.”

Spreading out before us was the stereotypical scenery of paddy fields one would see on a postcard for foreign tourists. The landscape contained water-filled paddies, thatch-roof houses, and narrow roads and waterways connecting it all together.

However, this was not just some old rural area.

On pillars set up at set intervals along the roads were solar panels that changed angle like sunflowers, the waterways contained small water wheels for power generation, and the paddies without water were being plowed by unmanned drone tractors. I’d also heard that the scarecrows contained sensors to precisely fire a spear-like sound wave at any animal movement using trumpet- or megaphone-shaped directional speakers.

To combat the cheap and plentiful imported vegetables, this special village created an ultra-high quality brand out of the limited domestic crops.

A new idea of the rural had been created to battle those other nations. It created a fusion of tradition and cutting-edge technology that used the words “safe” and “delicacy” as weapons to sell a bunch of grapes for 30,000 yen and a liter of the water in its rivers for 300 yen.

This was an Intellectual Village.

Japan had suffered a critical defeat in the precision machinery industry and these villages had been created during the great change of focus intended to help the economy recover.

That was the sort of village we lived in.

And at the same time…

“Look, Yukari. There’s an Umbrella Obake and a Lantern Obake.”

“Looks that way. But I think they’re in a hurry, so let’s leave them alone.”

Shinobu was pointing at a road beyond a paddy field. A paper umbrella and paper lantern both with a single comical eye were speaking loudly to each other while running(?).

“Hurry! Mrs. Yonesaki’s labor pains have already begun!!”

“Oh, dear. We need to hurry back to the house!!”

The perfectly recreated rural scenery had invited Youkai back to human civilization after they had hidden themselves during the rise of modernization. That umbrella and lantern were likely causing trouble at one of the village’s houses just like I was.

“Shinobu, I don’t think you need to search for landmarks on a straight road.”

“Y-you’re right! I’ll write on the map that this part is okay!”

“Shinobu.”

He began writing a meaningless comment on a piece of drawing paper.

Once we arrived at a critical fork in the road, he spoke up with a troubled look.

“I’m at the edge of the paper, so I can’t draw the rest of the map.”

“This was nothing but an empty straight road, so why did you draw it so long on your map?”

Of course, he would be travelling in a group for a while after beginning school, so there was no need for him to draw a map and remember the way.

In the end, he flipped the paper over, said “I’ll keep going from here!”, and continued drawing while dragging me further along. He was so focused on the paper that I wasn’t sure he had even seen the fork in the road.

Soon, someone approached us along the narrow road.

It was a girl of about Shinobu’s age who held a large dog on a leash.

She may have been the target of an overprotective parent because every single article of clothing was homemade. She looked a lot like a storybook illustration of Red Riding Hood.

“Oh, it’s Nagisa! Beauty!!”

“B-beauty.”

…If she understands that greeting, that effeminate TV personality must be popular with more than just Shinobu. I wonder if that’s been nominated as a fad phrase.

It seemed Nagisa’s parents had misread the harsh ups and downs of the late March temperatures because she looked hot in the Red Riding Hood look.

Shinobu would sometimes throw fried chicken bones to play fetch with it, so the Saint Bernard that protected the nervous-looking girl wagged its tail and welcomed him. The rumor was that Nagisa’s parents had put it through a legitimate war dog training program and it was trained to immediately rip out the windpipe of anyone suspicious who approached the girl, but I had to wonder if it was true.

At the moment, she hid behind the dog that looked like a giant stuffed animal.

“Shinobu-chan, are you with that Youkai again? A-aren’t you afraid?”

Oh, how troublesome.

The existence of Youkai had been generally accepted in the Intellectual Village, so it wasn’t often you saw someone afraid of us like this.

Of course, the nation had no laws to judge Youkai themselves. It was treated the same as an accident involving a falling rock or a lightning strike, so I couldn’t really complain if people were afraid of us.

Shinobu on the other hand was comfortable around Youkai to an unusual degree.

“Hm? Afraid of Yukari? You don’t have to worry about her. She doesn’t bite.”

…

Now, then.

“Roar!! Grrrrr!!!!”

“Don’t do that, Yukari! Nagisa won’t get it’s a joke! Look, she fell down!!”

By the way, even though Nagisa had stiffly collapsed like a cicada skin, the Saint Bernard did nothing more than calmly look up at me with its tongue sticking out. Then again, it could probably tell at a glance that I didn’t mean any real harm.

“Sh-Shinobu-chan, you’re mean. If you lie, you have to swallow a thousand needles.”

“No, Nagisa. Liars have to swallow a porcupinefish.”

In just a few seconds, their conversation took a zigzagging turn toward the roots of old words[2] Their conversations were quite peculiar. They were logical, but they would take sudden bypasses based on instinct or emotion. If you lost sight of the flow of conversation for even an instant, you would never find the link.

And if you could not follow the thread of conversation, you could not join in.

With nothing to do, I looked the well-behaved Saint Bernard in its small, round eyes.

No, I can’t start empathizing with a dog. I’m not going to sit and wait like that. My position has to be somewhere higher.

“Bye, Shinobu-chan. I need to finish my errand.”

As I thought about my dignity and respect as a Youkai, their conversation finally came to an end. Nagisa seemed to be dragged by the leash more than she was walking with the dog, but she began walking toward the small post office all the same.

We corrected our course toward our destination. Or rather, I corrected Shinobu’s course.

The village had a single elementary school, middle school, and high school and they were all located near each other. To ensure a safe walk to school, it was probably best to have them all use the same path.

“I’m thirsty.”

"Well, we did walk about two kilometers."

After traveling a little more, we saw a large area surrounded by a chain-link fence and a large rectangular building inside.

"Is that my school?"

"No, that's not where you'll be going. I think it's the high school. Y'know, the one Hayabusa goes to."

It was late March, so I was pretty sure all the schools were out for spring break, but there were still quite a few students in the schoolyard. Sports teams such as baseball or soccer may have been practicing.

For some reason, Shinobu was trembling while pressed up against the fence.

"What is it, Shinobu? If you're thirsty, how about we go in and borrow their water fountain?"

"No, I could never go in the high school! I don't have the right!!"

It wasn't some consulate, so I didn't see why he would have to worry about that. However, it seemed he had run up against a barrier of age or school year that kids seemed to have issues with.

Having heard the commotion, some girls wearing track suits approached from beyond the fence.

"Hm? What are you doing here? Do you have a lunch for your big brother or sister? If so, go to the main entrance on the other side."

"Ee!? N-no, I do not have a lunch! And I do not have a big brother who plays sports!!"

"Ah ha ha. Why's he speaking so politely all of a sudden?"

Shinobu had started to panic, but his confusion faded as time passed. His eyes opened as wide as they would go as he looked at the schoolyard through the fence.

"That's a big horizontal bar!"

"Yeah, I don't think I could do a back hip circle on that," replied one of the girls.

“There’s a sandbox there but no slide or swings. It looks boring.”

“Well, that is for the long jump.”

At that point, Shinobu finally seemed to take an interest in the girls he was talking to through the fence.

“By the way, who are all of you?” he asked with a confused look.

“We’re the tennis team.”

“If you lie, you have to swallow a porcupinefish.”

“Why are you calling me a liar out of nowhere!?” asked one track suit girl who seemed quite willing to play along.

Shinobu proudly puffed out his chest and gave a snort as he made an announcement to her.

“Girls who play tennis wear clothes that flutter around.”

“That’s only in official games. We aren’t going to wear that embarrassing thing all the time.”

Some boys who had appeared out of nowhere began pouting their lips and protesting while swinging their rackets around.

“C’mon, wear the embarrassing outfits! Half the reason we started playing tennis was to see those, so why are you wearing those horrible track suits year-round!?”

“Because lowlives like you have eyes, you damn boys!! Get lost! Any guy without pure eyes needs to go away!!”

Having heard all the noise, a female teacher who seemed to be the coach began hitting balls over at them with her racket, so the boys and girls began running around in confusion.

The teacher walked over to Shinobu who was the flustered source of the commotion.

“Are you interested in tennis?” she asked while perfectly expressionless.

“I don’t know the rules!! I only know you hit something back and forth like in badminton!”

“I see. Then let me give you a chance. This is an old ball. If you’re interested, learn how to use it.”

She forced the yellow ball through a hole in the chain-link fence and handed it to him.

One of the track suit girls running along the schoolyard opened her eyes wide.

“No fair! Are you luring him in with toys like Santa Claus, you old hag! No matter what you say, you’re the kindest one when it comes to little kids!!”

“Shut up!! I’ll have you know I actually wanted to teach elementary school! But the next thing I knew, I was dealing with you deceptive mini-adults and your dead eyes!!”

However, Shinobu had not heard that exchange because he was too focused on the ball in his hand.

“It’s yellow, round, and fluffy. I’ve never seen a ball like this. It’s like a baby duck.”

“Ahhh, Shinobu. This isn’t good.”

“Wow! It bounces really good. This baby duck bounces more than a baseball!!”

He shouted in delight as he threw the tennis ball against the road again and again, but I groaned as I watched.

He had reacted in much the same way when he had gotten a small rubber ball at the temple festival. After making a hole in every sliding door and screen in the house, he had broken the glass in the wall clock and helped revive the intangible cultural asset of the crying child locked in the storage shed as punishment. However, it seemed all of that had vanished from his mind.

I earnestly hoped that a small storm was not approaching the Jinnai house for that night.

“Shinobu, the elementary school is this way.”

“Sure. With this baby duck ball, I’m not afraid of anything!!”

With the legendary Baby Duck Shooter in hand, he grew too bold and tried to walk down the center of the road, so I grabbed the nape of his neck and pulled him to the side of the road.

The elementary school he would begin to attend come April was quite close to the high school. The middle school was also nearby, so the village planners had probably vaguely decided “the schools go here”.

Speaking of which, the village did not have a university.

A tidy place of learning may not have fit into an Intellectual Village that was strategically managed to have the proper image.

To use Shinobu’s checklist from before, this schoolyard had a few swings, slides, and other playground equipment. The horizontal bars seemed to have different heights for the lower grades and the higher grades. Also, the soccer goal and basketball goal were smaller than the ones at the high school.

However, a Youkai like me noticed something else first.

“Why are high schoolers kicking a ball around outside the elementary school?”

For one, it was spring break. Elementary school had no concept of sports teams or clubs, so there would not have been any elementary school students here in the first place. But when you found larger middle and high school students there instead, it looked a lot like they had chased out the younger kids to have the place to themselves.

And that may not have been far from the truth.

The children at the high school had been the passionate athletes. It would have been difficult to dislodge them if you just wanted to play around. And if they then wanted to play somewhere else, it was only natural what would happen next.

They may not have even realized they were forcing out the younger children who should have been there.

However, would elementary school children really choose to gather in a place filled with clearly older and bigger children? Just as Shinobu had been oddly unwilling to enter the high school, the elementary school children may have naturally left without being actively threatened by anyone.

From high school to middle school and from middle school to elementary school.

As the people were left out, they would move down to the next school in line. It was certainly a twisted social structure.

Whether he had caught on to the situation or not, Shinobu tugged on my kimono and asked me a question.

“Is this my school?”

“Looks like it. You’ll be going here every day come April.”

Before I had finished speaking, a soccer ball crashed loudly against the chain-link fence.

It rolled along the ground in front of Shinobu whose eyes were opened wide.

I assumed someone had accidentally kicked the ball this way, but I was quickly proven wrong.

“What are you doing here?”

I heard a scratchy voice much like metal scraping together.

It seemed this high school boy had kicked the ball our way on purpose.

“We already told you the rules, remember!? We’re using this place right now! We even got permission from the teacher as alumni of the school. We’re not gonna deal with little brats like you. If not having your schoolyard is such a problem, go tell on us, but don’t blame me for what happens then!”

“Hm? Hm???”

Shinobu was not used to being the target of that kind of hostility, so he was more confused than scared.

The boy seemed to have mistaken him for an elementary school kid who had come to play.

A glance through the fence showed that there were no small children despite it being an elementary school. Everyone there was a taller high school student.

"Dammit. Why do they get to be first string and we're only second string. They're just splitting us up based on who they like and using up all the equipment and practice space for themselves. Practice…I need to practice. Thinking you can win with guts or a fighting spirit is complete nonsense. I'll prove to them that people grow more with a training regimen calculated out by a program."

Shinobu tilted his head and looked up at me.

"Yukari, what is he talking about?"

"He's saying it's tough not being a winner because he can't live up to his parents' expectations or get the cute girls in his class."

I gave an arbitrary comment with a lovely grin and received obvious verbal abuse for my trouble.

"Shut the hell up, you damn Youkai!! I know you don't have any human rights, so how about I beat the shit out of you right here!?"

"We all know you can't do that☆"

The boy I decided to call Grumpy-kun kicked the fence and then left.

Um, what am I supposed to do at times like this?

Oh, right. Raise my middle finger.

"Yukari, what was all that?"

"Don't worry. Guys like that have probably never even held hands with a girl. You have him beat by a wide margin, so you don't have to worry about anything."

"???"

There was nothing more for Shinobu to see. Or rather, the schoolyard had more or less become a post-apocalyptic land where everyone had a mohawk, so sticking around was unlikely to be an enjoyable experience for him.

Today's theme had been "learning the way to school", so bringing that to an end and going home was the best option.

"Things can look different on the way back, so let's try that too."

“What are you talking about? It’s the same path, so there’s no way to get lost.”

“Shinobu, you’re already taking a wrong turn at the first fork in the road.”

I grabbed the nape of his neck and corrected his path.

He flailed his arms and legs around in protest for a while, but he finally gave a low energy comment as if he were a wilting house plant.

“I’m tired from walking so much.”

“Sorry, but I’m not going to carry you. Why? Because it sounds like a lot of work.”

Part 4

When we returned to the house that had a full security system and solar panels on its thatch roof, it seemed to be lunchtime.

The day's lunch was oyakodon.

Meals were always prepared by Shinobu's mother or grandmother, but the food was always plain yet reliable when his grandmother made it.

After lunch, I had nothing to do and just lazed around until I heard someone talking on the phone.

The voice came from the hallway.

I saw short hair dyed brown and glittering silver accessories.

Hearing he was in his late teens might make you think he was Shinobu's older brother, but he was actually his uncle.

His name was Jinnai Hayabusa.

He was an obvious delinquent boy who rode around on his electric maxi scooter and got into fights.

"Yes, yes. I get that. What? You think I'm a moron? I agree the instigator on TV is clearly suspicious, but someone that well-known would never do something so dangerous."

"You mean…still…how…ick works?"

"I already told you that! I don't know what the trick is or how it works! But they're definitely using a Package involving a Youkai. Anywhere from a dozen to a few hundred people are involved in a single crime, so we aren't going to find them that easily! Are you sure you aren't the moron here!?"

"Ha…ha. Watch what…say or…a kick in…balls."

Oh, a Package? This sounds dangerous.

That was a criminal method that incorporated the vague existence and traits of a Youkai into a single system.

For example, a Satori’s ability to read minds could be used for insider trading.

For example, a god of pestilence’s ability to make people sick could be used to bring a natural death to someone you hated.

These cutting-edge crimes that involved the occult were often put off until later by the professional police. This was not something a high school boy should be getting involved in, so I decided to cut in.

Specifically, I snuck up behind him and kicked him just as the voice on the phone had threatened.

“Take this!!”

“Anyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

I seemed to have misjudged my strength because Hayabusa was left rolling around on the ground.

I ignored him, picked his cell phone up off the floor, and heard a dignified female voice.

“Hello. I don’t know who this is, but thanks for stopping Hayabusa-kun from getting too worked up. Heh heh heh. That was a surprisingly cute scream. What did you do?”

“You could say I helped the student council president with the mischief she’s notorious for. Anyway, please don’t get our stupid boy caught up in anything. Half the time he’s suspended it’s due to the requests you give him.”

“I never ask him to go that far. While I do want to stop anyone in our school from getting involved in Packages, he has a bad habit of rushing in too quickly. It’s because he goes too far in his handling of justice. On a field trip, he rescued a girl in his class from some boys of another school and ended making the girl he rescued afraid of him.”

As I grew bored with her non-committal answer, I heard what sounded like a groan from the dead in the depths of the earth.

Delinquent Boy Hayabusa reached a hand toward me while curled up on the floor that was polished to an amber color.

I sighed, tossed the phone toward him, and gave him some relevant advice.

“Halfheartedly getting involved in Youkai-related crimes will only shorten your life. You can’t resolve this kind of thing, so if you have time to talk about this nonsense, try to find some trouble more your size. Maybe you could deal with those complete idiots who’ve taken over the schoolyard of the elementary school Shinobu will be attending soon.”

“Y-you do know assault is a crime, don’t you?”

I had done what I had to do and it wasn’t my job to decide whether he would listen to me or not.

There was no cure for stupidity or death. I began to leave the hallway, but another voice reached me from behind.

“Vwooooom.”

It was Shinobu. By the time I figured out he was making an airplane noise, he had already run right into my butt.

“Crash!”

“Shinobu, what are you doing?’

“Chomp.”

“Hyah!?”

The unexpected action made me jump away.

Not because it hurt, though!

I frantically turned around and Shinobu was confused by my extreme reaction.

“Hm? Yukari, what is it?”

“Shinobu, um, don’t do that. You aren’t supposed to bite people.”

That was something I should never have had to tell anyone, but he only tilted his head further.

“But mommy does it all the time. She bites my arm or side.”

“That stupid mother! Can’t she think about how things will influence her child!?”

Anyway, why is he here?

As I wondered that, he waved a hand weakly and asked me a question.

“Where were you going?”

“?”

“”I’m going to sleep, but I can’t sleep without you there.”

“Oh, you wanted to take a nap, didn’t you?”

Normally, a Zashiki Warashi snuck into the family’s futons as a harmless prank, but Shinobu had gotten so used to it that he could not sleep without someone in the futon with him.

I laid out the futon in his bedroom and we both lay down in it.

“Yukari, that’s too tight.”

“Bear with it.”

I was holding him in my arms more tightly than absolutely necessary for a good reason: he tossed and turned a lot in his sleep. It was completely normal for him to end up upside down, take the entire blanket from me as he rolled around, find his way underneath me, get tangled up in my long hair, or anything else really.

However, he did not have trouble getting to sleep.

The trip to and from his school must have been a lot for him because he fell fast asleep only five minutes after his complaint.

I had nothing to do until he woke up and my eyelids grew heavy as I passed the time doing nothing.

However, my eyes opened again before I fully fell asleep.

Someone had snuck into the bedroom.

“Heh heh heh. They’re asleep. Fast asleep. Buuut, this makes me a little jealous as his mother.”

It was Shinobu's mother.

For some reason, she was lifting up her breasts with her hands.

"Does he naturally choose the one with the bigger breasts and smoother skin? I guess I can't compare to a Youkai that doesn't age."

"You have no reason to get upset over this. The only reason he can approach me so easily is because I'm not as close an existence to him. In fact, it's because I'm so different."

"What do you mean?"

"Children sometimes have complaints they find difficult to make to a parent, but they can reveal those to a stuffed animal. There are advantages to being something other than human. …However, that can be a harsh truth to the one being treated that way. If you want to be his parent, you don't want that, do you?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure he puts that much thought into it."

"It's even harsher because it's done subconsciously."

I gave a dark and cold smile I never let Shinobu see.

This was a good opportunity and I felt like there was a little more I needed to tell the parent who was meant to protect him.

"There's something about Shinobu that worries me."

"What is it now?"

"He's completely unaware of that forbidden line that everyone can naturally sense. Think of a school at night, an abandoned hospital, or a sealed-off tunnel. He might find those places scary, but he would never think of turning back."

For example, he had no problem bringing his food into the altar room that smelled of the dead to eat with something as inhuman as a Youkai.

I felt it was worth noting the positive possibilities of getting along with any Youkai, but our traits did not always have a positive effect.

"He can't sense that line that everyone else can, so he always ends up stepping into areas that are best avoided. You need to be aware of that. If a location is separated out, there is reason why. Entering forbidden territory does not always have a happy ending like with Momotarou. It can also end more like Kaguya-Hime or Urashima Tarou."

Shinobu's mother lightly traced her index finger along her chin.

"Urashimia Tarou, hm? That really is a strange story. Unlike a lot of old stories, it has no lesson. The main character rescues a turtle and it ends with his misfortune."

That was how the story went when looking at it with human standards.

None of the major characters of the story – Urashima Tarou, the turtle, and Otohime – had meant any harm. Urashima Tarou had rescued the turtle with no intention of gaining anything from it, the turtle had tried to repay him with no ulterior motive, and Otohime had genuinely fallen in love with him.

Nevertheless, the story ended with his despair.

We might look a lot alike and we might use the same words, but humans and Youkai had definitively different values. In Urashima Tarou's case that difference was in the view of time. Youkai have no lifespan, so they had not known Urashima Tarou would not like what happened to him.

"It has nothing to do with good will or malice. That is a constant danger whenever humans and Youkai come into contact and it is a risk that never occurs between parent and child. Do you understand now that I'm not stealing your position?"

"Hmm."

That was all Shinobu's mother said.

It was short and concise.

But then she said more with a hint of a smile.

"But you don't want anything like what happened to Urashima Tarou to happen to Shinobu. That's not a bad reaction as a parent, you know?"

Part 5

It seemed I had fallen asleep at some point.

When I opened my eyelids, Shinobu was absent from the futon.

I started by heading to the kitchen and drinking a can of chilled soda from the refrigerator. The refrigerator had a flat-screen computer on the door for looking up recipes. I swiped my finger across it to wake it from sleep mode and opened the online news page.

" 'How Does Pizza Arrive at your Door in Only Thirty Minutes?' is finally getting a movie! This new schedule(?) mystery is from the author of the masterpiece 'Hamburgers, the Magic of Ninety Seconds from Order to Completion'. This will be another problem film filled with fast food trivia you'll wish you didn't know. It is being directed by…"

"…"

With the red can in hand and a blue face, I returned the computer to sleep mode.

That was not an article I wanted to read while drinking that. Of course, there were rumors the extreme junk food criticism was a way of opposing imported goods.

I carried the cold can around the house and found a large number of paper airplanes scattered around the Japanese living room that was large enough for a judo match.

This was not the result of some bizarre person getting obsessed with a single action.

A Kappa, a Tengu, and a Yamanba – a group needing no explanation due to their appearances in picture books and Youkai manga – were forming a system for mass producing paper airplanes using the giant pile of paper Shinobu had prepared.

I decided to ask about it.

"What are you doing?"

“Oh, Yukari. We’re having a paper airplane championship! It’s not too late to catch up now!!”

“What are you doing?” I asked again.

My voice was more threatening the second time and it was directed at the Youkai rather than Shinobu. They looked up as if they had come back to their senses.

“O-oh, no. I returned to my childhood for a moment there! We didn’t head into the mountains to do this!!” (<– Tengu)

“We’re here to get a sip of the mysterious sake of the Jinnai Brewery.” (<– Kappa)

“It’s made by humans, so I’m not expecting much. But I’ll try it out, so hurry up and bring some.” (<– Yamanba)

They showed no intention of apologizing for entering the house without permission. The Jinnai house seemed to act as an inn for travelling Youkai.

Shinobu was explaining his new discovery of folding down a corner of the rectangular paper and cutting away the excess to form a square, but he tilted his head when he heard what the Youkai said.

“Are you talking about work? I can go call for daddy and grampa.”

“Fwa ha ha ha ha. You probably shouldn’t. If they heard the master of Mount Kurama had rushed all the way here after hearing some rumors, they’d probably collapse in fear. It’s best for them not to know the details.”

That muscular man was the natural enemy of Youkai who would not hesitate to bring his fist down on anyone who strayed from the proper path, be they a Mikoshi-Nyuudou or a guardian of hell, but it was best for these Youkai not to know the details. They’d be the ones collapsing in fear then.

Shinobu then spoke up completely innocently.

“Do you want to see them work? Do you want to see how amazing they are?”

“If their sake really is good enough for Youkai to accept it, that would definitely be amazing.”

"How amazing?"

"Nobel Prize amazing."

Ah, this generally arbitrary group just gave them an arbitrary title!

But Shinobu was completely focused on the sudden foreign term.

"Nobel… Y-you just need some sake, right!? I'll show you how amazing they are! C'mon, Yukari! I think there's some in there!!"

"Yes, yes."

He pulled my hand and brought me right back to the kitchen.

Of course, I was not simply going along with what he wanted. My true reason was to stop him from getting into the first-class daiginjo.

The sake made by the Jinnai family was worth 50,000 yen a cup, so some people would not be happy if a child removed the stopper for a prank.

However, my fears proved unfounded when Shinobu did something unexpected.

He opened the refrigerator with his small hands, stuck his upper body inside, and pulled out a thick white liquid in a clear plastic bag.

"This is it, Yukari! This is the kind even I can have on New Year's, so it has to be the best."

"Well…I guess you can bring out the amazake. It isn't a product at least."

It was treated much like a leftovers meal made from scraps of meat and the centers of vegetables. Then again, everything from the ingredients to the preparation belonged to the Intellectual Village brand, so a cup would probably still leave you minus a 10,000 yen bill.

"How do you heat it up? The microwave?"

"You put it in a pot and use the stove."

As Shinobu started getting worked up, I grabbed the nape of his neck to stop him.

Should a small child be distanced from the kitchen which was filled with fire, hot water, and knives? Or should they be familiarized with cooking at an early age to give them a good sense for the process? Both arguments could be made, but it was not my job to make that decision. If Shinobu's family had chosen the former, I had to deal with the pot on the stove.

Not that I was all that good at cooking. No matter how many times I tried making rice balls, they never came out as a proper triangle. I could not let Shinobu see that.

Some of it burned onto the bottom of the pot a little, but I managed to heat up the amazake in about ten minutes. I had Shinobu carry a few cups and I brought the entire pot into the living room.

The Kappa, Yamanba, and Tengu looked a bit skeptical when they saw the thick white liquid in the transparent cups.

"Oh, I was expecting some mysterious sake, but it's just some amazake for kids. If you think that's going to get full marks from us, you- bvgrfaaaahhhh!?"

"What is it, Kappa!? Don't tell me living in the water made your entire body overly sensitive to heat!"

"No, Tengu. Look at his face. He's overcome by such euphoria that his pupils are opened wide. It looks like this sake might be known as the Youkai Crusher for a reason. I think I need to prepare myself and try it out for myse- bhyaaaaaaaaaah!?"

"Y-Yamanbaaaaa!!"

Youkai would not die from being stabbed or shot, so it was a mystery why they were so influenced by this amazake. And yet they would be able to eat an entire pufferfish or killer jellyfish without issue.

The Tengu assumed he alone would be fine no matter the disaster, so he chugged his cup of amazake and ended up collapsed on the living room floor.

"See, daddy and grampa are amazing, aren't they?" said Shinobu.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha. It's been a long time since I've felt this good. I'll turn you into Ushiwakamaru!”

“Eh? But Benkei’s way cooler. Then I could be big and muscly like daddy!”

You don’t need to be big and muscly.

Shinobu’s grandfather entered from the sake brewery behind the house in order to take a break, but he stopped walking when he saw the bodies lying around the living room.

He turned the troublesome question to me.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m fully prepared to be thrown into the storage shed with Shinobu, but let me say one thing first. Shinobu seems to believe you’re artisans on a Nobel Prize level.”

“It’s hard not to get mad after seeing the commotion in here, but there’s something to be said for seeing humans and Youkai get along using something you made. That muscleman will probably still yell at you all like some kind of demon, but he might cry in secret afterwards.”

Part 6

Shinobu and I were severely lectured.

Fortunately, we weren't locked in a room.

Then again, whenever Shinobu was locked in the storage shed, he would cry and wild Youkai would arrive to comfort him. Last time, some mascot-types that were either foxes or tanukis ended up filling the shed with him.

His parents had since developed a more effective method.

They only needed an illustrated encyclopedia of deep sea fish. Then they only needed to slowly turn the pages.

Giant oarfish.

"Nooo!?"

Footballfish.

"It's all squishy! It's alive, but it's all squishy!!"

Snow crab.

"Oh, the crab's kind of cool."

Rattail.

"Gyaaah!!"

I was forced to sit still while he clung to my upper body and desperately tried to look away from the book.

As for why he had such a problem with deep sea fish…

"These are scary! That one looks like it'll pop if you poke it! That one puffs up if you catch it and something comes from its mouth!!"

It was already evening.

After finally being released, I walked down the hallway that was filled with the orange sunlight. Shinobu was watching TV in the large Western living room. He was sitting with a giant fox and tanuki that had gotten in somehow. They were probably travelling Youkai who were spending the night.

I could hear voices from the TV.

“There’s fox udon and tanuki soba, but why isn’t there anything with badgers!? We’re seriously troubled by that question!”

“But badgers don’t sound very delicious! No one likes snakes!!”

“That’s adder! They barely sound the same!!”

“Then what’s a badger?”

“It’s in the same family as weasels and wolverines.”

“Wolverines! Now you’re scaring me!!”

“A badger isn’t that frightening! It’s more like a red panda or a raccoon!!”

“Oh, so it’s like a tanuki. Then why not just say tanuki?”

“Because it’s a badger! The fox, the tanuki, and the badger are the big three for transforming Youkai!!”

The stage on the screen had a single microphone stand with two people in suits standing on either side of it. In other words, it was a manzai act, but one of the two was clearly a Youkai. There were no laws or obligations restricting us, but the lack of human rights also meant we could not work. After all, we were not “human”. However, it seemed there was a loophole in taking a position much like a dog that was part of an act. I didn’t know the details of the situation, though.

I didn’t feel like interrupting, so I left for the time being.

However, I still had nothing to do, so I wanted someone to fill the time.

And there was one person I knew was the easiest to deal with.

“Haaayaaabuuusaaa!! Help me kill some time!!”

“No!! Why is this mass of selfishness here!?”

As expected, Jinnai Hayabusa, the brown-haired, accessory-covered delinquent boy, let out a girlishly shrill voice. He had been maintaining his maxi scooter in the garage he had made in the shed.

He had brought this unreasonable fate on himself by trying to look cool by drinking a Cassis Orange he had made. Then again, it wasn’t actually alcoholic. He had made an imitation by melting some cassis jam in hot water and mixing it with orange juice.

However, my enemy(?) was skilled.

To oppose my special skill “Forcing the Flow of Events”, he recovered from his panic on his own.

“Hey, god of pestilence. I’m sure you’re only here because Shinobu wouldn’t play with you, but as you can see, I’m busy.”

“Ahh, ahh. Mic test, mic test. Please respond, Jinnai Hayabusa-kun, the indecent boy who feels a slight throb of the heart when he hears the word ‘sister-in-law’. I repeat…”

“Bphhhh!!!?? Y-you idiot, stop making up things that could put irreversible cracks in our family!!”

“But it’s profane in a different way how you get so caught up over the word ‘sister-in-law’ and she has no interest whatsoever. Do you not care in the slightest what other people want?”

“Again, you’re completely wrong here!! You’re not going to claim these baseless accusations are part of your ‘innocent pranks’ as a Zashiki Warashi are you!?”

“Shinobu’s one thing, but you’ve got a troublesome trait as well. It’s not often you see someone who’s actually scared by a Hitotsume-Kozou or a Nopperabou. Of course they’re all gonna gather together to scare you.”

“Yeah, but I get attacked by the deadly ones too like a Kappa or a Makuragaeshi. Thanks to that, I could be killed at any moment.”

He seemed to think he was hated by Youkai, but in a way, it might have been the opposite. He was treated a lot like the monster in an RPG that gave a ridiculous amount of experience points.

“So what exactly are you going to do to kill time?”

"Well, I'll roll you around and…"

"Don't scare me! And I asked for specifics! I'm not some reaction comedian whose weapon is the boiling bath. If I tell you to stop, you seriously need to stop!!"

Tch.

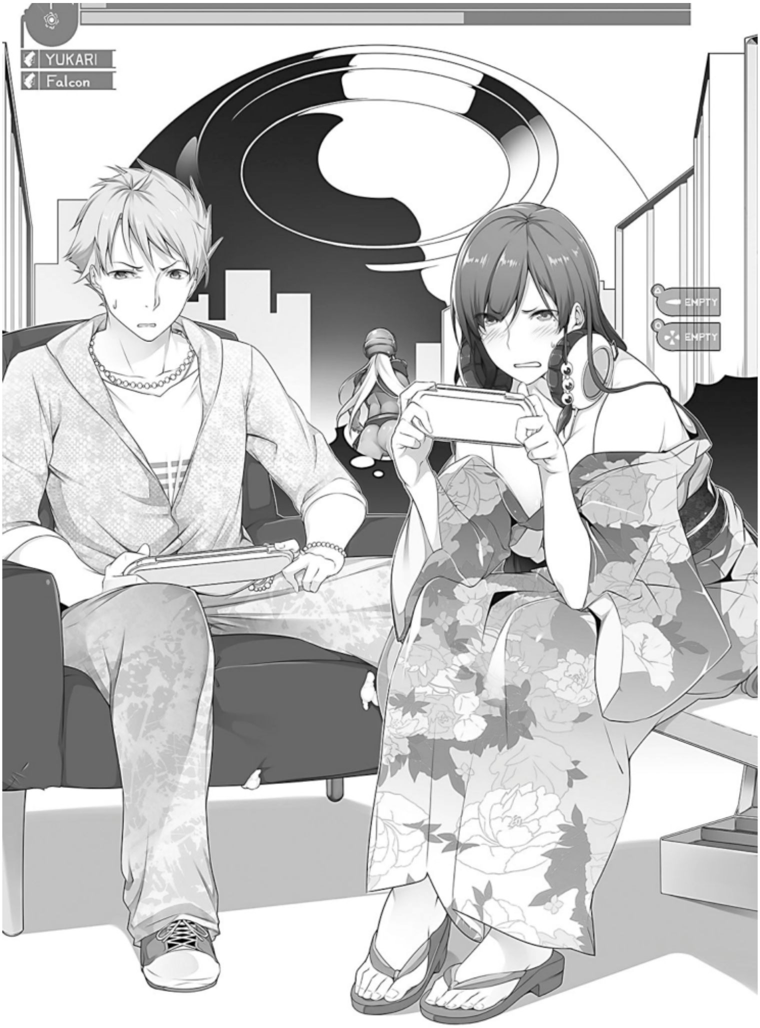
This seemed to be another trait of a Zashiki Warashi. If the other person reached the point of actually crying, I naturally put on the brakes. My defaults were set so I would stop at the line of what qualified as "innocent".

I had no choice, so I got to the real issue at hand.

I reached into the chest of my kimono and pulled out a handheld game system advertised for its graphics.

"Shinobu said I was really bad at this hunting game. I don't want him to hate me, so help me practice."

"I'm pretty amazed just seeing a Youkai from an Edo-period drawing holding a handheld game system."



The game involved humans with weapons destroying giant out-of-control machines and tearing out the junk parts. It was well known for the online video advertisement with the development team getting argumentative about the rating not mattering because there was no actual blood.

It seemed Hayabusa had one of the systems as well.

Despite being less than a meter apart, we did not look away from our own screens.

As I pressed the buttons, I spoke.

“Hayabusa.”

“What?”

“I’m super interested in the writing filling that white board and the countless arrows connecting it all together.”

“Mgh!? J-just ignore it.”

“You’re writing up all the information on a ‘case’ and connecting it all? Do you want to be a detective from a police drama or something?”

“I told you to ignore it!! If you keep tearing into my heart, I’m going to cancel this mission to get the wings off of Giga Gordon! I’ll hit the start button and select ‘give up’!!”

“If you do that, I hope you’re prepared for a storm at the dinner table tonight. Once I bring up the term ‘sister-in-law’, the gates of hell will open. That supposed Cassis Orange of yours comes from a recipe your sister-in-law invented to avoid drinking while pregnant, isn’t it?”

“You idiot!! How long are you going to keep that up!? And it’s all in your head!!”

“The truth isn’t what matters. What matters is who they’ll believe.”

“You’re as horrible as someone who makes false molestation accusations!!”

Incidentally, the white board had the following things written on it: “gain trust”, “a famous name”, “false information is not a crime”, “far too few victims”, “some other rule to narrow down the targets?”, etc.

Just that was not enough to see what it was Hayabusa (and his high school’s beautiful student council president) was pursuing.

Then again, it was an amateur investigation, so they may not have known either.

“You really like doing things you get nothing in return for, don’t you?”

“I’ll get something eventually! It’s just the drop rate for Giga Gordon’s wings is 2%. In the worst case, we’ll have to fight this same powerful enemy 50 times!!”

“I don’t think that’s how probability works. Also, I was talking about your investigation of organized crime using Packages.”

“I’m not getting involved because I want to.”

“Do you seriously think that?”

“My upperclassman keeps telling me these things I don’t want to hear about. And she knows I can’t pretend not to see it once I know about it.”

“Have you fallen in love with her?”

“D-don’t ask a teenage boy that so bluntly.”

“Is that so? Resolving these things isn’t going to remove the label of delinquent from you, so I’m not sure why you want to stand in harm’s way for the very people who gave you that label.”

“I don’t have a choice. The police apparently put off the crimes involving Youkai and I sometimes hear about people from my school being involved.”

He sounded annoyed, but by the situation rather than what I had said.

“And this time, the term ‘organ trafficking’ has come up. There’s no way I can overlook this one.”

Part 7

Once night fell, I left the makeshift garage and returned to the house. It seemed dinner was ready, but Shinobu was forming a one-man protest after charging into the kitchen.

“Grandma, make Salisbury steak too! You still have time!!”

“Sorry, Shinobu, but I have trouble with recipes written horizontally.”

“You can’t give up before you even try! I’ll help, so let’s try to make it!!”

He was clearly troubling his grandmother, so I snuck up behind him, slipped my hands beneath his arms, and lifted his small body up like a forklift.

I even made the sound effects.

“Whirrrrr! Kathunk, kathunk!!”

“Ah! Stop! What are you doing!?”

“Moving a certain little boy out of the way. Kathunk, kathunk!”

“Ahhhh!! But the ambitions of the Salisbury Steak Empire!!”

Sorry, Shinobu, but Salisbury steak doesn’t go well with nikujaga and salmon.

I carried him to the Western living room just in time for his mother to poke her head in.

“Dinner will take just a little longer, so can you give Shinobu a bath?”

“You heard her.”

“But I’m starving! I can’t focus on a bath without Salisbury steak!”

Despite his protests, he raced to his room once I set him down. He was most likely grabbing his bath set.

I made my way to the altar room to prepare the yukata I slept in.

As I did, Shinobu dashed toward me.

“Hurry, Yukari! The bath is waiting!!”

“I see you’re as heavily equipped as ever.”

His wash basin had a rubber ducky, a submarine, and a wire ring meant for making bubbles. He also held goggles and had a float around his stomach.

He clearly had a fundamentally flawed idea of what a bath was for.

“What are you talking about? It wouldn’t be as fun without a bunch of toys!”

“Fine, fine. …Now, then. I’m missing my spare obi. I’ll keep searching, so you go on to the changing room.”

“Make sure you hurry!”

His footsteps rang out as he left the altar room at full speed.

I soon found an obi in a color that matched my yukata and continued after him. However, he was nowhere to be found in the changing room.

I received the following eyewitness testimony from his mother.

“Shinobu? He went to the bath with my father-in-law earlier.”

“Shinobu.”

Shinooooooobuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!!

“N-no! It doesn’t matter who’s in there. I can still join them!!”

“You really shouldn’t. I’m worried about the old man’s blood pressure.”

I ended up diving head first into the kotatsu and sulking until a freshly-bathed Shinobu left the changing room in his pajamas.

His eyes opened wide when he noticed my illegal occupation of the kotatsu.

“You’re playing secret base.”

"Shinobu. I have no intention of speaking with little boys who don't keep their promises."

"Wow! You'd be safe in an earthquake like this! Let me in, let me in!"

"Ow, ow! There's not enough space!! Your heel is shoved nicely into my solar plexus!"

I crawled out of the kotatsu like a bear chased from its cave after losing a fight.

Uuh… I don't even get to sulk in peace.

Shinobu's mother gave a bitter smile.

"Unlike Youkai, humans aren't all that influenced by obligation or grudges. You just have to stay constructive and positive by making another promise. How about sleeping in the same futon tonight?"

"Mh."

It was true lying on the living room floor would feel too empty.

I had nothing to gain by continuing to sulk and what was done was done, so I decide to take a bath.

Once I opened the door to the changing room, I heard movement from Shinobu.

He was speaking with another Youkai that was here as a surprise guest at our "inn".

"I am a Tsuchigumo! I don't follow the rules of humans, so staying up late is fine by me. People say I'm disobedient because I'm a delinquent!"

"I don't care, but come with me. Going to the bathroom at night is scary, so you can take me to the bathroom door."

"Sure thing. Delinquents are nice to little kids and abandoned cats on rainy days, so leave it to me!"

He was speaking with a spider several meters across, but as it was a Youkai, he was not even remotely afraid of it. Then again, kids his age might grab a normal bug too.

It made me wonder how old humans had to get before they started being afraid of bugs.

I thought on that for a bit, spent about half an hour in the bath, changed into my yukata, and left the changing room.

Shinobu was already gone.

I got another eyewitness testimony.

“Shinobu? He ate dinner, brushed his teeth, and then…what did he do? Oh, right, right. He went to sleep with that Tsuchigumo.”

“…”

Shinoooooooooobuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu

Part 8

“Beauty!! Today, I’ll be introducing a drink I absolutely recommend. I call it the completely-change-the-feel-of-your-skin-in-five-years drink. If drinking this doesn’t make you healthy, you should just give up on life! Now, the actual ingredients are…”

A crossdressing middle-aged man with brightly dyed hair (he was not transsexual and he merely viewed it as another fashion choice for men) wiggled around while shouting about something on TV. However, none of the adults in the living room were watching.

Sake brewing had been the Jinnai family occupation for generations and 50,000 yen a cup summed up just how skilled they were. Of course, judging an artisan solely for their monetary value had a way of making them mad.

In the name of product research, the house was filled with alcohol almost every night.

And they showed no real sign of limiting themselves to Japanese sake.

“If you don’t have an open enough mind to honestly recognize what your rivals are doing right, you can’t take on the world. Ohhh! This wine is all bubbly! What goes well with Shaoxing wine? Chinese food seems a little too on the nose.”

To put it bluntly, this was a family that needed strong livers.

It seemed the Jinnai line had always been able to handle its alcohol and any woman who married into a sake brewing family would have to like alcohol. This created a family selectively bred to have tough livers thanks to Mendelism.

At any rate, everyone was getting worked up, so I asked the obvious question.

“Um, why am I here?”

“Your heart was headed in a dark direction after Shinobu dumped you. That’s the perfect time to drink and forget it all!!”

“I’m a Youkai that can’t be killed even if I’m stabbed or shot, so it’s nonsense to think I'd get drunk. I technically don't even need to eat. I just do it if I feel like it."

"Calm down. I know you want to logically suppress your emotions when you're feeling down, but you can't! You can't, can't, can't! It's best to let them out as soon as you can. Suppressing them just lets them build up! Forget all about logic and take a nice swig!!"

"Sigh."

It didn't really matter.

I could swallow cyanide or monkshood without issue, so I decided to drink some and leave once the others collapsed.

…

…………

…

"Hic. Huhhh? Why'sh the world all shpinny even though I'm a Youkai?"

"Mah hah hah hah hah hah!! That's the magic power of sake! Nothing's impossible and you can forget everything unpleasant!!"

This was not right.

I wasn't even sure how much time had passed, so I tried checking the clock on the wall

What? I can't read this. It's all melty like what's-his-face's painting.

The very fact that I couldn't remember such a famous artist's name showed just how far I had fallen.

"Oh, I get it. Youkai focus more on mental laws than physical ones, so the placebo effect works extra well on us. If I think I'm getting drunk, I really will."

Come to think of it, didn't Hyakki Yakou's anti-Youkai process include research into methods of trickery that used optical illusions and incorrect assumptions?

"What? You can still think logically about this? Then you need another drink! Keep on drinking!!"

“Oh, honestly. I don’t even care about being ditched by Shinobu anymore.”

“Nya ha ha ha ha ha!!”

The two women laughed like idiots.

Shinobu’s father, grandfather, and grandmother were there too. His grandmother merely smiled while downing sake at a rapid pace, but the men seemed unable to keep up with our excitement.

To put it more simply, they were a little disturbed by us.

And that didn’t sit right with me.

I slowly stood up and approached Shinobu’s father who was covered in muscles and had a fist that exceeded the upper limits of humanity.

Huh?

Don’t I normally view him like the lord of fear and can’t even look him in the eye?

“Hey, muscleman!! What’s with that grumpy look? Drinking’s supposed to be fun! Get to it!! And that ambiguous expression is banned!!”

“It’s no use. He only has the grumpy look of a sunglass-wearing killing machine from the future because he’s shy and don’t know how to act around women☆ On our first date, I found him standing at the meeting spot with a look on his face that made me suspect he’d actually called me out for a fight.”

“Come to think of it, why’re you always wearing those tight shirts? Hm? You got a problem? Say it loud!! Now that Shinobu’s ditched me, I’m not afraid of anything!”

“Hya hya hya hya hya hya!!”

“Gwa ha ha ha ha!!”

Ahh.

I have a feeling I’m saying a bunch of things that’ll cause problems later, but I can’t think straight.

Part 9

“Oh, Tengu. Have you heard about ?”

“Just some rumors. But just hearing the name makes me feel sick. He definitely brings down the overall definition of . It’s not often you see version that’s so specialized in killing and nothing else.”

“He’s shown up.”

“This is gonna be rough. A lot of are going to die again.”

“But it’s not like we can do anything about it. He exists as a that’s been cut free of the simple hierarchy of power.”

“The Aburatori, hm?”

Part 10

On the following morning of March 25, my palm reflexively flew to the high-pitched alarm clock and an odd chill reached my arm as it left the futon.

I-it's cold!?

And when and where did I even fall asleep last night?

The rain shutters were fully closed which blocked out the sunlight and left the area almost completely dark. That made it even harder to grasp the situation.

A female voice slipped into my ear from very close by. In fact, it was in the same futon.

"Heh heh heh. This is a married couple's bedroom, you know? You're quite aggressive to force your way in between a young couple like that."

"Ahh!?"

I suddenly grew very concerned about the gaps in my memory, but the situation did not wait for me to recover from that confusion.

"Yukari, are you in here? It's amazing! It's amazing outside!!"

"…?"

Shinobu entered the dim room and it took me a while to realize why he was so excited.

It was his next words that clued me in.

"It's snowing! Everything's white outside!!"

"Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

I grabbed the futon with all my strength to put up my defenses.

Shinobu was the type to go running around in the yard rather than curling up in the kotatsu. If I had to oversee his playtime, I would be thrown out into the below-zero weather of an early morning blizzard.

His mother seemed to realize I was unwilling because she spoke to her excited son.

“Shinobu, if you want to play outside, make sure you eat breakfast first.”

“Ugh… But look! You’ll see if I open the window. It’s amazing out there!!”

“Colllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllld!?”

“Colllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllld!?”

Shinobu’s actions turned the entire bedroom into a giant refrigerator and the traitor kicked me out of the futon as a sacrifice.

“Shinobu, go play with the Zashiki Warashi! I’m sure you’d love making a snowman!!”

“A snowman… C’mon, Yukari!!”

“No!! Please no!! It’s freezing everywhere! Just walking through the wooden hallway is hurting the bottom of my feet!! What’s going to happen to me outside!?”

My desperate pleas fell on deaf ears.

The magic of the snow caused Shinobu’s eyes to glitter to a disturbing degree while he dragged me into the snowy scenery while barefoot and wearing nothing but a yukata.

“B-brr! Brrrrrrr!?”

“Wow! I can’t even see the ground!! Everything’s white!!”

He was fully equipped with down jacket, mittens, long boots, and a wool cap, but I was receiving enough damage to give me a heart attack if I weren’t a Youkai.

“Mommy said to make a snowman! She recommended it, so we have to do it!”

“I-I-I-I can’t. There’s no way I can grab snow with my bare hands!! My fingers will fall off. Are you sure this is made of water? It feels more like liquid nitrogen! It’s so cold!”

“If you don’t hurry up, the snow will cover you and you’ll turn into a snowman.”

Not dying is not always a good thing.

While my mind filled with what sounded like a sentence from a terminal care specialist’s essay, I resigned myself to forming the snowball to become the core and then rolling it around. I don’t even remember what I shouted at the time. My memories vanished for a completely different reason than the sake from the night before.

“A-ah!? Afha!! Sh-Sh-Sh-Sh-Shinobu, surely this is enough! We made a wonderful snowman, didn’t we!? Please release me!!”

Fortunately, his mother arrived to tell us breakfast was ready. I loathed her for wearing a giant fur coat as she did, though. Shinobu’s interest shifted to the food and I was allowed to return to the thatch-roof house.

“I-I’m freezing. My hair literally is frozen!”

“I did heat up a bath, so I suggest you take one before eating.”

I wanted to tell her she should have called Shinobu in earlier if she had time to do that, but any more arguing would have left me frozen like a fish even if it didn’t kill me.

But as soon as I had entered the bath and started to stick one leg in the tub, the bath’s window was thrown fully open.

The bath quickly transformed into a refrigerator.

“It’s amazing, Yukari! Daddy’s doing something amazing!!”

“Byaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!?”

Shinobu had supposedly gone to the living room, but he had gone right out into the backyard to get in a surprise attack from outside.

He was currently pointing towards one end of the back yard again and again.

“He knocked a bunch of snow from the roof and made a white mountain! It’s a slide of snow!! It’s so amazing!!”

Th-that damn man is our enemy.

He’s an enemy of all Youkaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!

I was naked and shivering, but I soon realized Shinobu had vanished from the window and I heard footsteps circling around.

Oh, no. He's approaching the changing room!

I frantically charged into the changing room and desperately grabbed my yukata.

Before I could put it on, the boy burst into the room.

"Hurry! Hurry, Yukari!!"

"…!?"

I had managed to avoid being thrown naked into the snow, but my defenses may not have been much better.

Ten minutes later, I returned to the house while shivering like a newborn fawn.

"I-I learned something new today. Heating yourself up before being thrown into the cold makes it even worse."

That was when the doorbell rang.

No one could stop Shinobu now.

At his age, children tended to think about nothing but food when they were even remotely hungry, but the world of snow outside seemed to be stimulating his mind more than breakfast.

He dashed down the hallway and spoke loudly from the entranceway.

"Oh, it's Nagisa's grampa!"

"That's right. Are you the boy that's been corrupting my granddaughter!?"

I doubted children of that age could get up to too much trouble of that sort, but she may have tried to put on her mother's lipstick or something.

I didn't have the energy to fix my yukata and walk to the entranceway, so I just lay on the floor and listened.

"What are you here for?"

"I'm using my truck to check all the houses that probably have a hard time removing snow from their roof. I'm gathering all the young ones to help, but I suppose the Jinnai Brewery has enough young ones to handle it on their own."

"Young? So is Nagisa here?"

"I didn't want to bring her with me, but I couldn't leave her to walk through over a meter of snow with just the Saint Bernard. …Hm? Hey, old man. I'm here with some volunteers. We'll handle the roof and the road in front of the house, so have your boy look after Nagisa."

I heard leaving footsteps, so I assumed Shinobu was back to playing in the snow. I wished him well while he did so far away from me.

However, his mother soon arrived with food on a tray.

"Sorry, but can you take this to Shinobu? I'm sure he's focused on the snow now, but I don't want him to skip breakfast."

"Why me?"

"If I did it, I'd end up nagging him and telling him to eat. I don't want to ruin his fun while Nagisa-chan is here."

"And the real reason?"

"I don't want to go out in the cold. I'm going to spend all day curled up in the kotatsu."

I noticed the tray contained a few snacks on small plates in addition to Shinobu's food. I guessed they might be for Nagisa.

"If they're having a snowball fight, I doubt they'll want to eat."

"Those two wouldn't be doing that. I hear you two already made a snowman and he'll probably play house now that Nagisa-chan is here. So how about adding in some real food☆"

I borrowed a raincoat from Shinobu's grandmother and skeptically made my way outside. But to my surprise, Shinobu and Nagisa really were playing house in a snow igloo in the large yard. I doubted the two of them could make such a nice igloo, so the people gathered for snow removal had likely made it for them.

Presumably to make the house seem more realistic, the igloo had a small waterproof bath TV inside.

“A Japanese translation of ‘Innocent Philosophers: 100 Questions from Children that Stumped Senators’ has arrived! The most amazing part of the book is…”

However, the children were ignoring the TV.

“Welcome! Today’s flounder is cheap.”

“Sh-Shinobu-chan, this is our house, so we don’t talk about the food like that.”

Nagisa wanted an orthodox household while Shinobu kept making more unconventional adlibs. He seemed to want adventure more than stability.

Today’s theme for Nagisa’s outfit seemed to be a snowman because she was covered from head to toe with fluffy white wool.

“Shinobu-chan, you’re the daddy, so you look after the baby. Make sure she gets to sleep so she doesn’t cry in the night.”

“But those peaceful days would not last long for Insect Mask who secretly protects the peace of the world. Kaboom!! It’s the FBI!!”

“Run away, honey!! Wait. What did you do, Shinobu-chan!?”

Shinobu began flailing his limbs around and almost unintentionally destroyed the igloo, so interrupted with the tray of food.

“Wow. You have bread for breakfast at your house?”

“When grandma makes it, it’s rice, but when mommy makes it, it’s bread.”

Shinobu pulled out the colorful skewers advocated by Beauty and stabbed them into the vegetables.

“Are you doing this too, Nagisa?”

“I-I am. And I’m even losing weight bit by bit.”

When I thought about it, I realized that diet method only worked if you were the person who decided on the menu.

“Do you drink milk, Shinobu-chan?”

"The adults love it when I do."

The two of them got down to eating, but they also had "food" made from balled up snow next to them. Without my intervention, they might have eaten snow indefinitely. Shinobu's mother may have intentionally had me stop that.

"Eh? You're lying. There's no way you can do that. You're a porcupine fish, Nagisa!"

"I-I'm not lying. And it's a thousand needles."

They began arguing while ignoring the consideration of the adults.

It was hard to join in because the conversation jumped all over the place, but I somehow managed to grasp the general subject.

"Are you talking about fried prawns?"

Both Shinobu and Nagisa looked up at me.

"Nagisa says you can eat fried prawn tails, but there's no way you can eat that plastic-y thing."

"Y-you can eat it. You just don't at your house. You can eat fried prawns from the head to the tail."

Shinobu then tilted his head in confusion.

"But fried prawns don't have heads."

"They do to! They're prawns! How would they swim in the ocean without a head?"

"Ah ha ha. You don't know anything, Nagisa. Fried prawns don't swim in the ocean. Their fried outside would get all wet."

"Th-then where do you think they live?"

"Well…Their outside is all crispy, so…"

"It can't be on land. Their outside would get all muddy."

"The sky."

"They don't fly! Fried prawns can't fly!"

Part 11

After clearing the roofs of the Jinnai house and the neighboring house, Nagisa's grandfather and the young men with him drove to a different area. That meant saying goodbye to Nagisa.

Thanks to Shinobu's mother's love of Western food, we had fried prawns for lunch. Shinobu tried to eat the tail and took another step up the stairs to adulthood.

That's right. You can eat the tails.

I could hear an early afternoon talk show on the TV.

"Eh? My recommendation is… Oh, I know. I'll choose 'Ten-Year Money Management Techniques You Can't Afford Not to Know'. The best part about this book is-…"

"That's a business book *you* wrote! Don't just start advertising it like that!"

After finishing lunch, Shinobu spoke with his grandmother who was ironing the laundry.

"Look, grandma. I folded the shirt."

"Oh, how wonderful."

"I can fold pants too."

"You're so skilled with your hands, Shinobu."

With a smile covering her face, the old woman used the instant Shinobu wasn't looking to refold the clothing at Mach speed. She had perfected the style of praising people to help them grow.

Once the ironing was complete, Shinobu spoke up again.

"Since I finished helping, will you tell me a secret of the Jinnai family?"

"Okay, then. Did you know this house has a staircase?"

"Hm? But it's a one-story house, so it doesn't have stairs."

"But it does. There is a small door somewhere that leads to a short and narrow staircase."

Oh, is she talking about the stairs to the attic?

Shinobu went to grab a bag with a first aid kit and emergency goods inside.

He pulled out the flashlight and helmet and ran back.

"Yukari, let's go search for buried treasure!"

The story seemed to have grown inside his head, but once he was this excited, he would never take a nap until he checked.

He tightened and loosened a bundle of rope he didn't really know how to use and his mother called out to him. She was skillfully holding a tray of iced tea and cookies on one hand.

"Shiiinobuuu. Will you carry this to the Japanese living room?"

"I'm looking for the buried treasure now!!"

"You'll only get lost if you try that without a map and I won't give you a map of the house unless you help out."

"Drat," cursed Shinobu as he took the tray.

While watching him totter down the hall, I asked his mother a question.

"Is someone visiting again?"

"Yes, and on this snowy day no less. She seems to be a friend of Hayabusa-kun's. Heh heh heh. And she's pretty high-spec if you ask me."

High-spec, you say?

I could only think of one candidate for a "high-spec" friend of Hayabusa's. Then again, there was only one human girl who would have a proper conversation with that fierce-looking boy.

As always, I grabbed a rag and wiped up the iced tea Shinobu had spilled on his way to the living room. Inside, a girl in a high school sailor uniform was sitting casually at the tea table.

Her name was Atou Minori.

Her black hair was gathered behind her head with a hairpin and her huge breasts looked terribly out of place in a school uniform. The legs extending from her miniskirt and their overly casual positioning were both quite seductive. She was wrapped in an aura that announced every bit of her body was top quality.

“Here you go. It’s black tea.”

“Hm? Oh, excuse me. You’re Hayabusa-kun’s broth-…no, nephew, aren’t you? How about we play a game? With the cookies stacked up like this, we have to remove them one at a time without causing the pile to collapse.”

She gave a friendly smile, but Shinobu looked troubled.

“When a guest is here, I’m not supposed to play around.”

“Eh? Oh…That’s certainly correct, but it kind of hurts to be treated like a complete stranger.”

Incidentally, Shinobu did not get so timid around the Youkai that entered the house without permission. It seemed we really were such distant beings that he saw no need to be concerned.

Hayabusa then entered the living room with a notebook in hand.

“Sorry about the wait. …Why are you hanging your head like that?”

“The shock of a slight rejection hit me pretty hard. Can I just go home for the day?’

“What’s this? Are you a complete moron or something?”

Having completed his task, Shinobu seemed to have nothing on his mind but the treasure map his mother was to give him. However, the beautiful student council president (ha) seemed interested in the helmet he wore.

“A quick question. What is that?”

“I’m exploring the attic!! The journey to the secret treasure chest is harsh and dangerous. It’ll be a dangerous adventure.”

“Kh. Why must everything you say stimulate my interest!?”

“Atou-san.”

That quick comment was enough for Atou Minori to reluctantly sit up straight.

Meanwhile, I grabbed the curious Shinobu’s hand and pulled him back to the Western living room. We received a hand-drawn map of the house and made our way to a sliding door at a corner of the hall that led nowhere.

Inside was a steep staircase that almost looked like a ladder.

“It’s a staircase up.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Wow, Yukari! The treasure map is real!!”

“So it seems.”

I followed him up the stairs to the attic.

As an attic, the ceiling was low and it was not flat like in a normal room. It followed the shape of the thatch roof and rose to an acute angle in the center.

In exchange, it extended a good ways to the sides. It was a large house, so it should have been obvious that removing the inside walls would make a large space.

It was surprisingly warm, but I guessed that was because the house’s heat moved upwards.

“I-it’s dark…but I won’t lose! This is nothing compared to going to the bathroom at night!!”

While urging himself on, Shinobu continued further in.

He seemed not to have noticed that there were bare light bulbs hanging here and there and that he could light the area with the flip of a switch.

Darkness lurked in that space. Places like this reminded me of the organization named Hyakki Yakou that had once imprisoned me, but this place had no connection to that gloomy past.

It had originally been a large room for servants to sleep. The Jinnai house was famous for its warm reception, so I doubted it was filled with the strange kind of grudge that made spiritual something-or-others' mouths water.

"Ksshh! Kssshhhhh! 'Ingredient Choices that will Shorten Your Life' begins Thursday at seven. This week, we will be taking a thorough look at the scary parts of fish that are usually viewed as healthier than pork or beef."

"Wahh! Wh-what was that? I just heard a voice. Is someone there!?"

"Shinobu, your emergency flashlight has a radio on it. You probably hit the switch."

After my exasperated comment, I came to a sudden realization.

"Hm?"

Because the lights were off, I could catch glimpses of the house's light through the gaps in the floorboards. I peered down and saw the Japanese living room from before.

Hayabusa and Minori were speaking with the tea table and notebook between them.

"As I said before, that method would mean too many victims. A crime like organ trafficking stands out, so they'd want to keep things quiet. There must be something else we're not aware of."

"But if some shady salesman came to the closed society of an Intellectual Village, no one would fall for it. Using the TV would be the best method."

"You misunderstand. I'm not completely denying your celebrity theory. I'm trying to say there's something else on top of that. Something that would prevent anything from showing up even if the police searched the celebrity's house."

"There is one thing that caught my interest related to that."

"You mean the online store? I thought that would be the best place too."

The flashlight turned toward me.

It blinded me a bit and Shinobu's excited voice reached me.

“Look, look, Yukari! This is amazing!”

“What is it, Shinobu?”

“I found the treasure chest. And it had a backpack in it! A brand new one! This is the legendary backpack that only elementary school kids are allowed to wear!!”

His grandmother had likely set this all up before she began ironing.

But despite that heartwarming thought, I couldn’t focus.

Something else tugged at my attention.

The voices coming from the small gaps in the floorboards gave me a very bad feeling.

“The celebrity advertises it on TV and the customers buy the official goods on the online store. That’s the standard way of doing it.”

“But if you could make a site similar enough to the official one to draw in some of those customers, they would buy a completely different product while thinking they were buying what the famous celebrity recommended.”

“Also, the celebrity on TV wouldn’t know the other site existed. It wouldn’t have any connection to his business, so he wouldn’t even know he was getting his fans caught up in a crime.”

“The true criminals have no connection to the celebrity, so it doesn’t matter if the police search his house. That’s how the criminals are using a national broadcast for their crime.”

Shinobu gave me a blank stare.

The voices had to be reaching him, but they may have sounded like news of a far off country to him.

“Hayabusa-kun, let’s go back over the Youkai being used here.”

“The Aburatori. It originated in the Tohoku region, but unlike other Youkai, it didn’t appear until the Meiji period. That makes it a newcomer. However, its traits make it dangerous enough to overwhelm even other Youkai. Isn’t that right?”

“It’s a Youkai that disguises itself as a farmer and slips in with the other villagers working on the farms. However, no one has ever seen its true form. The next thing they know, it's already made its way in, kidnapped a child, pierced the child with a thick skewer for cooking fish, and roasted the child over a fire."

"Its goal is supposed to be the oil from the child's organs, but it isn't known why it kills children to take their oil."

"It's a Youkai without the lessons present in in most Japanese ghost stories. The story doesn't teach you to go home before it gets dark, not to swim in the river, or anything else. The Youkai simply appears, kidnaps, and kills. This is a negative product of more modern times when the tradition of fear has been lost, but it's a problem when people start spreading fear that has no countermeasure."

I felt like my head was spinning.

I felt like I had overlooked something terrible and that I was only noticing it now that its fatal result was showing itself.

A celebrity. An online store. A Youkai that kills children. Dieting. Organ trafficking. Colorful skewers. A method of losing weight. Oil taken from the organs. Kidnapping children and removing their organs. A Youkai that performed meaningless killing. The Aburatori. A Package using that dreadful Youkai.

I turned my head with the stiff movements of a doll needing to be oiled and looked at "him".

His supposed diet had visually reduced his weight, but the real reason lay elsewhere.

With the lightness of a marionette that's strings were cut, Jinnai Shinobu collapsed to the floor.

The backpack inside the "treasure chest" rolled out.

I could not even scream.

I used my trembling hands to roll him onto his back and hesitantly touched his stomach over his clothes.

At that point, I just about passed out.

As if I was touching a thin rubber film, my slender fingertips sank down deeper and deeper.

It was as if the organs meant to be there had vanished.

Part 12

I lost track of the flow of time.

The next thing I knew, I was in Shinobu's bedroom and he was sleeping in the futon.

It was night outside and I could hear someone speaking from somewhere.

As I absentmindedly listened, I finally realized it was Jinnai Hayabusa's voice.

That was just how messed up my ability to grasp the situation was.

"The Aburatori is a Youkai that kidnaps children and takes the oil from their organs. We are pursuing an organ trafficking Package that uses that trait to steal organs without anyone knowing. More specifically, it takes organs for transplant into children ten and under."

"…"

"Organ trafficking seems like it would be naturally eliminated by tissue engineering, but young children are apparently a different story. The technology saves the healthy tissue before the illness occurs and creates new organs when necessary later. A baby born with an incurable disease can't supply any healthy tissue, so even if the diseased tissue is used to create a new organ, there's still a risk of the disease reoccurring. That's why even that wonderful new technology isn't perfect."

"…"

"And with normal transplants, they have to wait their turn on a long list. Also, extremely young children can't use adult organs. The lung or liver can be cut down to an appropriate size for transplant, but according to my upperclassman, there's a limit to that too. However, there's almost zero chance of getting an organ transplant from a brain dead child. …And even if people would be hesitant to do evil to save their own life, parents are willing to bloody their hands for their child. Some stupid bastard is taking advantage of those feelings to make some money here."

"…"

"Shinobu used the colorful skewers endorsed on that diet show, didn't he? I thought that looked dangerous, but it seems you're chosen as the Aburatori's target if you prick the inside of your mouth with them. In other words, your organs are taken. I hadn't caught on until recently. If only I'd been sure, I would have taken them from him!"

"…"

"The Aburatori is a Youkai that kills without anyone noticing, so even the children having their organs taken in the organ trafficking Package don't feel any pain. Something like an emulator makes up for what was taken. Of course, that won't last forever. If that was enough, the children waiting for their surgery could just have their organs emulated. In other words, the emulators come with a time limit. Once that arrives, Shinobu will die."

"…"

"The key to all this is of course the skewers he was using. That celebrity who was going all out advertising them on TV and the online store where they're sold are completely unrelated to all this. If we look into the other site, we'll find the people behind this Package. Once we do that…"

"I've heard enough," I cut in quietly.

That's right. I had no interest in the answers the humans were looking into.

To sum it up, a Package that stole and sold children's organs without anyone knowing had been unleashed on this village.

The effeminate celebrity on TV had advertised a skewer diet and the criminals had created a fake version of the official site to pull in a few of the celebrity's customers.

The customers who accessed the fake site and bought the colorful skewers identical to the real ones would be sent dangerous items that contained the deadly power of the Aburatori. From there, it was a matter of probability. If some percentage of the users pricked the inside of their mouth with the skewers, they would be designated a target and have their organs secretly removed.

That was how the village's children such as Shinobu and Nagisa had been brought into it.

As the children continued their carefree daily lives, their situation had grown truly hopeless.

Also, I most likely knew who the silly human behind it was. Real life was not a mystery novel, so the most suspicious person was almost always the criminal. In that case, there was only one possible candidate I had seen recently. They knew a lot about programming and software, they were gloomy, they had plenty of complaints about Intellectual Villages, and they were unlikely to care if they got the villager's involved.

But I didn't have time to gather evidence and accuse the criminal.

Shinobu's time limit would arrive as I did so.

It could be a few hours away or only half an hour. I didn't know the specifics, but he had collapsed because the emulator was starting to give out. I doubted I had much time left and I had to end it all before he "fully realized" that his organs had been taken.

"Yukari…"

He spoke from the futon, so I smiled and lied.

"You have a cold. Playing in the snow too much really isn't a good idea."

"Nn."

I couldn't tell if that was an agreement or a wince.

"I need to tell Nagisa I'm sorry."

"?"

"Once my cold is better, I need to tell her I'm sorry that I said I couldn't eat fried prawn tails."

With that, he shut his eyes as if he had run out of strength.

Seeing it made me think quietly.

Ahh, he's really going to die.

There's no normal way to save him now.

The new backpack he had found in the attic lay next to his futon.

It would never be used even once.

It would become a symbol of the tragedy and it would collect dust because no one could bear to throw it out. No one had wanted it, but some unwanted interference had caused it all to fall apart.

As the thoughts in my heart scattered into a million pieces, something quietly gathered together.

I realized I had made up my mind.

Shinobu had not exactly fallen asleep. His mind was rising and falling from consciousness like when suffering from a high fever. After I watched his consciousness temporarily drift off, I spoke quietly to Hayabusa.

"You humans can continue judging the human criminal, but I'll take a different route. As a Youkai, I'll directly crush the Youkai at the center of this."

The standard process was to gradually solve the mystery, find the criminal, use the traits of the Package against them, and settle it with a battle of wits.

But I was not going to go along with that.

Against someone who existed outside the rules, there was no need to follow the rules yourself.

I would render their carefully-prepared stage useless on the most fundamental level.

I would even destroy the world if it meant saving Shinobu and the others.

"Wait. Don't tell me…"

Just once, I stroked Shinobu's forehead as he lay in the futon with his eyes shut.

I then stood up and gave what amounted to a death sentence.

"I will personally kill that piece-of-shit Youkai known as the

Aburatori.”

Part 13

To those who did not know the truth, it may have seemed like a useless action.

However, there was no such thing as a useless action in this world.

"…"

I left the house and entered the snow. The full moon was visible directly overhead in that strange snowy night. My hands desired a weapon and my feet took me to the shed.

Two small figures hurriedly followed me.

They were a Hitotsume-Kozou and a Nopperabou. I did not know them, but they may have met Shinobu somewhere.

"Are you going to fight the Aburatori? I understand how you feel, but this makes no sense. A Youkai in a Package is just having its power misused by the worst sort of human. The Aburatori simply has the ability to kill. It doesn't actually want to kill."

"Also, we Youkai don't die even if we're stabbed or shot. That doesn't always apply when it's Youkai vs. Youkai, but that means you're the one in danger here, Zashiki Warashi."

That didn't matter.

When I arrived at the shed, I grabbed the thick padlock on the door.

I did not need any kind of technique.

I merely needed a "chance".

I randomly stuck a wire in the keyhole and shook it left and right.

The lock readily opened, so I opened the door, looked around, and randomly reached out my hand.

"A high branch cutter, hm?"

It was a two or three meter aluminum rod with a pair of pruning shears attached to the end.

The silhouette resembled a naginata.

More importantly, it was more than enough to jab and cut with.

I bit the edge of my lip with my canine tooth, scooped up the red blood with my tongue, and pressed it on the tool's blade.

The Hitotsume-Kozou and the Nopperabou looked troubled.

"You can't fight the Aburatori just because you have the power to kill. It doesn't even matter if you have a connection to *the* Hyakki Yakou."

"Its true essence lies in something other than strength. It simply appears, kidnaps, and kills. In other words, no one knows where it is. That's what makes it so frightening."

Oh, that.

It was true the human police were unlikely to ever find the Aburatori no matter how long they searched. Not even cutting-edge unmanned security could stand up to the power of a Youkai that surpassed human knowledge.

But there was one exception and I had it.

"Do you know what a Zashiki Warashi has control over?"

"?"

"Destiny."

Part 14

Logic and instinct were not necessary.

I simply had to obey my inborn power.

I left the Jinnai property with the high branch cutter resting on my shoulder in place of a naginata and I ran through the snowy night illuminated by the full moon. I turned right at a fork in the road without hesitation, I continued straight at the next intersection, and I entered a very narrow farm road.

A Zashiki Warashi had control over destiny.

It was something like a formless temptation. Just as TV ads, magazine ads, internet topics, and other such things created a large wave that caused the customers to choose a product, people would slip in the direction that was easier to understand or easier to move in and they would not even realize they were doing it.

But if you understood how that temptation worked, you could move against the tide and fight it.

Normally, there was no way to come across the Aburatori just from running around randomly. That was simply how the world worked. In that case, I only needed to continue in the direction I would normally never go. I had to move in the direction that seemed most out of place and that I felt the most reluctance toward. If I moved against the flow, I would naturally head toward the most unlikely destiny.

I would meet the Aburatori who I supposedly could never meet.

And I arrived at that destiny.

“Oh? What have we here?”

The hoarse voice of an old man stopped me in one corner of the Intellectual Village.

The full moon stood out to a strange degree in the blizzard.

At first, I thought it was a scarecrow standing in the center of a snow-filled paddy with no water in it.

This was the symbol of an oddity invading a farming village.

Like it was an illusion, the entire scene seemed cut off from the rest of the world. It almost looked like something from a hanafuda card.

This place was “complete”.

It was a place no one should have been able to enter.

No matter how much times had changed and no matter how much foreign culture had been imported, the Aburatori and I were surrounded by the pure scenery of “rural Japan”.

No one could encroach on this territory.

It was a transient alternate world.

And its ruler, the deadly Aburatori, stood in the center of that blue scenery.

“My, my. What an adorable intruder. However, I have no interest in you even if your name labels you a ‘child’. Why are you here?”

His kimono was dyed dark to hide any stains and it was tightened around his legs. I spotted leggings meant to protect his lower legs. Also, he had a broad conical hat on his head. This was the stereotypical outfit of a farmer, but the arms and legs leaving the kimono were closer to being those of a mummy than of an old man. His hat was worn too low to see his face, but I had my doubts about whether he even had eyes anymore.

The hat hiding his face had a pattern drawn on it that resembled a single large eye. The giant eye was filled with an imprudent brightness as if it were toying with people’s lives.

But none of that mattered and my reply was blunt.

“I am here to kill you for Shinobu’s sake.”

“Ho.”

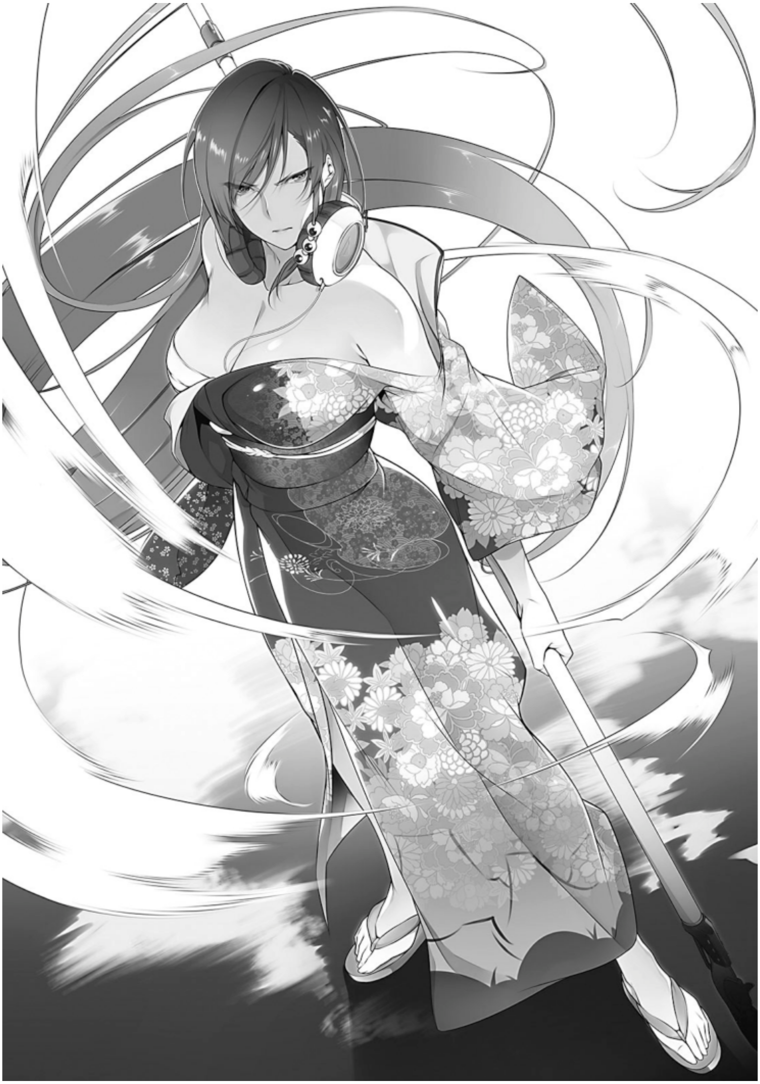
He replied with a twisting of the voice that sounded like a mix of surprise and laughter.

“My, my. I had heard rumors I was being used for human crimes, but what has my power done now? You can discuss this with me. It pains me to think my power is being used to harm while I am wholly unaware. Now, how should we begin?”

“Try not to cry.” My voice came out as if to cut into him. “That settled it. I had thought the odds were about 50/50, but now I’m certain. Aburatori, I will kill you and I’ve found my reason for doing so. I am 100% certain that side of you is toying with Shinobu. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“W-wait. Please wait! It is true I may have been careless, but surely you understand as a Youkai who has grown close to humans. Humans are clever. They always manage to outdo us in cunning. No matter how careful you are, you sometimes simply cannot avoid being incorporated into a Package. I…I am a victim here too!!”

I felt I was being self-righteous.



Essentially, I was killing a stranger to protect someone I knew. That was no different from the parents of the sick children who were buying the organs. In order to save their precious child, they were willing to take another's life. That was the essence of it.

"Don't tell me you aren't involved."

However, I was not going to take the life of someone "wholly uninvolved".

In other words…

"After all, you purposefully incorporated yourself into this Package because – deep down – you enjoy killing.”

A brief silence fell.

It was so silent that I almost thought I could hear the snow falling in the light of the full moon.

That silence was broken only by my voice.

“There are many different kinds of Youkai. Some curse themselves for possessing a deadly power, some reach a compromise and coexist with humans despite possessing such a power, and some… some enjoy attacking humans from the bottom of their heart. You wanted to have your fill of killing children while also shoving the blame onto some humans so you could hold the position of a victim. That’s why you overlooked the Package that you very well knew was being assembled. Am I wrong?”

He began to writhe.

An eerie wriggling as if of worms came over the unseen face below the hat.

The movement produced a laugh.

“Heh heh. Kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah!! So you saw through it! You saw all the way through it! But I didn’t provide any of the material needed to reach that answer. Is that also because you’re a Zashiki Warashi in charge of destiny?”

Youkai like us were the occult given form and with a mind enclosed inside.

Thus when we were used in a shikigami, magic, or a Package, a way of controlling the mind beyond simple logic was needed. That is, if you didn’t pacify us, we would bare our fangs.

So before discussing the evil of the Package, one had to sometimes question whether the Youkai itself was good or evil.

“This child organ trafficking Package uses the TV and an online store. I thought it was an interesting setup, but it appears to have gone too far. I have a bad habit of prioritizing my prey over safety.”

“Of course it did. This kind of thing will be discovered pretty quickly. Even some local high school students had caught on.”

"No, not necessarily."

I heard a sticky sound that made me imagine a smile beyond the hat.

"The buyers of the children's organs would never speak a word. If they revealed that an organ obtained through illicit means was located inside their precious child, it would affect that child's future as well as their own. So they will never speak of it. More importantly…"

I heard what sounded like heavy objects falling into the snow around us.

"The silly human behind this had a perfect plan, but they hesitated at the last second. They said they just couldn't kill children, so they had the organs taken out as quickly as they could. I told them I would cut off the emulators to kill the children if they didn't meet their monthly quota, so as long as this criminal system exists, they will keep the prey coming to me as if on a conveyor belt. I rearranged the entire system like that."

They looked like pre-packaged Salisbury steak.

The fist-sized squishy objects were wrapped in clear plastic.

But I did not look at them.

I knew they were the "product", but I did not look at them for the moment.

"So you took over the Package."

"Hm, that's not quite how I interpret it. I prefer to think of it as gathering everything I need to more efficiently kidnap children."

"You no longer even have something you gain in exchange for the children's lives."

"The Aburatori was never something that saved anything. There is no meaning in the action of taking the oil. I am…yes, I am chaos. I act solely in search of human fear."

This Package had been created by human hands and yet it had completely left their control.

It was similar to the threat of a leaked biological weapon.

This monster had risen from the level of a deadly Youkai that simply walked through the darkness and its atrocities had spread to a wider area.

“I won’t even bother asking why.”

“Oh, but that’s what I most want you to ask. I do have my own personal view on killing. Connoisseurs are always picky.”

“If I kill you it opens the way for Shinobu to live. Destiny is telling me that. So die. I won’t let you refuse.”

I stepped on the accumulated snow and thrust out the long blade that was covered with my own blood.

Meanwhile, the Aburatori merely smiled.

“Did this chance to meet me make you think you are somehow special? I am a variation on a deadly Youkai while you are a harmless Zashiki Warashi. The difference in strength is obvious, so there should be no meaning in a fight.”

“No, you know there’s meaning.”

“Why do you say that?”

“*Because you are preparing for a fight.* Those fish-cooking skewers in your hands are the symbol for killing children, aren’t they?”

“…”

He seemed to have only noticed it once I pointed it out.

His intent gaze dropped to the several dozen metal skewers spread out like a fan.

One of the worst of the deadly Youkai would have no reason to react that way to a harmless Zashiki Warashi, so this was proof enough that I was not just a harmless Zashiki Warashi.

“How strange.”

This threat taking a farmer’s shape spoke while his shoulders shook.

He was of course laughing.

“If you follow the legends back, we are both Youkai from Tohoku.

One is a symbol of the mysterious attackers who kill children. The other is a symbol of all the children killed by their parents to have fewer mouths to feed. To think the two of us would meet in the same place.”

The Package no longer mattered.

This was a fight to the death between Youkai and there was no room for human intervention.

We both naturally named ourselves as if cruelly making a criminal tremble by telling them how they would be executed.

“Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi. Personal Name within the Jinnai Family: Yukari.”

“An Aburatori. A variation created in modern times when the tradition of fear has been lost.”

And as if we had agreed to it beforehand, we clashed.

Part 15

The sound of clashing metal filled the air.

Orange sparks intruded on the strange white and dark blue scenery of the full moon over the snow.

The Aburatori looked like a farmer hiding his face behind his hat and his arms and legs looked like tree branches. Every time he rotated, he scattered several dozen skewers like a shotgun. He seemed to have an unlimited supply because a few dozen more would spread out like a fan each time the old man moved his fingers.

A distance of twenty meters was nothing to that Youkai.

He would appear, kidnap, and kill without anyone knowing. The concept of distance likely did not fit well with him.

“Wonderful.”

While scattering countless skewers as if dancing, the Aburatori spoke in a voice that hurt the ears.

Orange sparks scattered and his smile seemed to grow each time the branch cutter knocked down a bullet.

“Wonderful!! A single scrape from my skewers is enough for me to take all your organs! Stepping on one of the skewers you have knocked to the ground would be fatal!! You are certain to lose your organs at some point, but your Youkai trait is allowing you to avoid that fate!!”

It did not matter what he said.

I did not need to worry about it.

I did everything I could to protect my field. I only had to fight the temptation and choose the option most removed from the one I was naturally drawn toward. Because a Zashiki Warashi was so weak, that “impossible destiny” would allow me to survive.

“Still, this is a strange twist of fate,” said the Aburatori while spinning the fan of skewers in his hand. “I could be seen as a symbol of the adults who kill children. The existence of monstrous people like that is frightening, but that very existence allows people to dispose of children without dirtying their own hands. Those wicked thoughts were what brought me into existence."

"There is no shortage of food in this age, so you can't justify killing by saying it's one less mouth to feed!"

"Hah hah hah!! But they are slaughtered in dark rooms, left in the parking lot of pachinko parlors, and recently I believe they are killed even before birth when an incurable disease is detected. If anything, this age is even crueler. There's no pressing reason for killing children, yet the act is on the rise!!"

"Do you really think the age desires those meaningless atrocities!?"

"What other explanation is there? This country is a cursed land with a culture of family killing at a level not often seen in the world. They have long killed their parents with the practice of *ubasute* and killed their children when food is scarce. But even now that they have plenty, the family killing continues. These people can still kill their family even after forgetting the reason why. That is their true essence. I have become the standard!!"

Despite the shotgun blast of skewers I moved forward.

The barrage was not as hopeless as it might look.

As long as I understood destiny, I easily knew how to break through while only deflecting two or three of them.

"On the other hand, you are the symbol of the children killed by those practices. You come from the convenient idea that the children killed by their own parents will actually bring prosperity to the family as guardian deities! I may be the attacker and you may be the victim, but we are actually quite similar. When you get down to it, we were both created by the desires of the parents who killed their children!!"

The concept of distance was meaningless. There was no such thing as close range and long range.

The Aburatori clearly believed that because he gave up his own advantage and took a step toward me.

"That is why you could not forgive someone who killed children for no reason. Did you enjoy feeling like a child's guardian? But this will bring you no comfort. Even if you save this one child you call Shinobu, it will not revive the *many children* who were killed in the past to bring about the being known as the Zashiki Warashi."

He was now in range of the branch cutter I used in place of a naginata.

By opposing destiny, I thrust forward the blade that would normally never hit.

The Aburatori audibly slipped a few centimeters to the side of the blade.

He was a step beyond me?

Even my power…no, the power over destiny that Hyakki Yakou developed wasn't enough to reach him!?

"You can never be saved," whispered the Aburatori from so close that I could feel his breath.

Several dozen skewers spread out like fans in both his hands.

"No one can change what has already come to an end. That applies to the children of the past and for the one you call Shinobu."

A moment later, a downpour of over one hundred sharp pieces of metal rushed toward my stomach from only a few centimeters away.

Part 16

Ksshh!!

Ksssssssshhhhhhh!!

Click…kssshhhhhhh…click….ksssshhhh!!

Part 17

It all came to an end.

The high branch cutter I used in place of a naginata was a weapon with a thick blade much like pruning shears attached to the end of a two meter shaft. It had a long reach, but it was useless when right up next to an enemy.

On the other hand, the Aburatori could use over one hundred thick skewers when using both hands. If he threw them all at close enough range for his breath to reach me, I had no way of deflecting them.

He had anticipated any attempt to evade and had scattered the skewers over a large fan shape. Moving left or right and even ducking down would leave me full of skewers.

Those skewers were the symbol of killing children, removing their organs, cooking them over a fire, and taking the oil.

A single scratch would use the logic of the child organ trafficking Package to divide my organs up and pack them in plastic, and more than one hundred of them were flying toward me. As I could not defend or evade, it was plain as day what would happen.

However, that was by the Aburatori's logic.

I could control destiny, so I had no obligation to follow his logic.

The sound of clashing metal filled the air as all the skewers were knocked down by the branch cutter.

"What?"

The Aburatori looked completely dumbfounded for a moment.

Not that I could blame him.

He had moved within a few centimeters of me and my naginata-analogue was over two meters long. It would have been impossible to knock down all the skewers unless *all one hundred or so of them flew backwards.*

Also, hitting five or ten of them was one thing, but to knock down all of them would require them to move as if they had been drawn in by a powerful magnet.

"Is it really that strange? It was wrong to ever start thinking about Youkai using the laws of physics."

"Wha-…bu-… Don't tell me… Don't tell me you'd done it from the beginning…"

Did he think I had solved the mystery of this incident surrounding him?

Did he think I'd gotten back at him by using the traits or weakness of the Youkai used in the Package?

If he really thought that, he was far too self-conscious.

This was a story of revealing the rules controlling Youkai and using those rules to defeat them.

However, he was not the only Youkai here.

This was my field.

This was a cruel fairy tale where he would meet a tragic end unless he analyzed the traits of the Zashiki Warashi, found a weakness, and took appropriate action.

"From the beginning, I was fighting against the destiny that exists within the rules of the Zashiki Warashi. My actions were only meant to fight the destiny that would lead to Shinobu's death. That just so happened to take the physical form of picking up a weapon, running through the village, and fighting an Aburatori."

How I swung the branch cutter had not mattered.

How and from where the skewers had been thrown had not mattered.

As long as I had fought the destiny that would lead to Shinobu's death, everything around me would correct itself to bring about that result.

The locations of the branch cutter and the skewer *could be manipulated to fit.*

"You seem to be mistaken about something."

I spun around the branch cutter.

I held it so it passed from my back and under my left arm as if making a tricky shot in pool.

"I came here to rescue Shinobu. I did not care in the slightest about you!!"

I once more thrust the blade forward at close range.

With a dull sound, the thick blade stabbed deep into the center of the Aburatori's chest.

A Youkai would not die from being stabbed or shot, but things were different in a battle between Youkai. That blade had already been covered in my blood, so the damage would take effect.

"Gh…bh…?"

He looked down at his own chest as if seeing something very strange.

He then collapsed backwards as if widening the wound by forcibly pulling out the thick blade.

The blood that finally decided to spew out was black and seemed to indicate the nature of the Youkai.

"It's over."

"Yes, it is."

I was shocked to receive a reply.

I looked over to see that the Aburatori was speaking where he lay sprawled out in the snow. It was hard to tell if the words were coming from the mouth hidden by the eye-pattern hat or the gaping hole in his chest.

"The child organ trafficking Package will fall apart with the Youkai at its core gone. To correct the unreasonable action, the stolen organs will likely return to the original children."

This was strange.

Something was not right.

If that was all, then why was that evil Youkai smiling?

“But if that happens, what will happen to the sick children who have already received their organ transplants? Not even I know that. They may have the organ torn from them and die or they may regain the original diseased organ. The result is the same either way. They have no future. *You have done nothing more than kill children to save a child.*”

“……………………………………………………………………………………………

I thought my breathing would stop.

After all…

“The people who tried to make money off of organ trafficking were probably trash. The parents who bought the organs knowing where they came form should probably be punished for their actions.”

He grinned.

Even after losing and sinking into death, the Aburatori savored his sadistic victory.

“But the sick children themselves did nothing wrong. Just to be clear, the number of children saved was greater than those attacked. When the organs are split up and given to individual patients, a single child can save multiple children. Meaning! You have created a situation where you kill a greater number of children to save a smaller number of children!! Heh heh heh hah hah!! Welcome to the path of killing. I hope you enjoy sinking into this unescapable mire.”

He did not beg me to therefore save him and return things to normal.

He preferred to enjoy the present situation.

No matter what I did and no matter who I tried to save, either the children whose organs had been stolen would die or the ones saved by those stolen organs would die. This Youkai had stood in the way of the clichéd goal of “saving children”, but he had waited until now to make me bear the heavy cross of letting someone die.

"…"

For a while, I stood motionless in the moonlit snow.

The makeshift weapon felt heavy in my hand.

Finally, I squeezed my hand and quietly remembered I held a weapon.

"Ha ha."

The Aburatori laughed while a shocking amount of blood flowed from his dried chest.

"Kill me if you like, but it will change nothing. Now, choose to let the children die while resting easy that no one can see this shameful action."

He clearly did not understand.

Say there was a Person A and a Person B and a single person had to die. That did not mean that you could not save both A and B.

Yes. If Person C saw that terrible situation and gave his own life as an additional option, that single required life could be taken while both A and B were saved.

"Do you remember that I called myself Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi?"

"What about it?"

"Do you really think *the* Hyakki Yakou would put together a project that would do nothing more than let them choose between the destinies currently in existence? Do you really think they are such a weak organization that they could not complete a project on that level and it would stall in the prototype phase?"

"You can't mean…it goes beyond that? But the only phenomenon greater than what you have already demonstrated is…!!"

"I have already shown you I can modify destiny. That is, freely choose from the existing options. *But this goes beyond that.* Hyakki Yakou attempted and failed to create a method of creating a completely different line of destiny from nothing."

Here, that would mean saving all the children whose organs had been taken and also saving all the children who were allowed to live by the taken organs.

The only way to allow for that clearly contradictory situation was to create a brand new destiny. The world had to be deceived into thinking two completely identical organs existed, as if they were twins.

What I had to do was simple.

It was what I always did: move my body such that I opposed the invisible temptation.

However, this was completely different from before. It was like a puny human using only their bare hands to oppose a press meant to crush cars. By any normal reckoning, I would be crushed. As if the world's destiny were rejecting a mere individual's circumstances, normal destiny would continue even if it meant crushing the one who desired change.

But I would force that reckless action to work.

A creaking sound filled the air as I kneeled on the spot. I held the branch cutter in both hands and pressed its tip against my stomach.

I did not know what meaning the action held.

It likely had no real meaning in a physical sense.

But the overwhelming pain as if crushing each of my fingers and compressing my backbone reminded me of the destiny I had to fight. I became aware of the very thin foreign feeling passing from the top of my head to the end of my butt. It had been placed inside me. This was a product of Hyakki Yakou's insane ideas and reliable techniques. The theory had never been completed, but I forced it to work regardless. As a result, a sensation of long, thin wires twisted within me.

Ahh.

It's going to break.

I naturally knew that.

No matter the result, I was going to lose everything as a Zashiki Warashi. Like an automaton with its gears messed with, I would no longer function as a Youkai.

“Why do you go this far?”

I suddenly heard a hoarse voice.

It came from the Youkai that still ruled the area despite having lost.

“It is only a finite human life. No matter how many you kill, more appear like bamboo shoots after a rain until they cover the surface of the earth! There are more efficient methods for an eternal Youkai. Even if someone dies this generation, you only have to choose a favorite from the next generation. And yet you…”

“You would probably never understand even if you did live an eternity,” I spat out at him. “That’s why you don’t even cut it as a ghost story. You don’t give any lesson such as don’t lie or treat your parents right. You can’t bring anything beyond useless cruelty and scorn.”

For an instant – truly just an instant – I heard the Aburatori’s face bend behind the hat.

But I did not continue watching.

I had something to take care of that was much more important than that failure of a Youkai.

I thrust the thick blade into my own stomach.

The thin wire-like foreign feeling running through the center of my body shattered like glass.

Part 18

And that was how I lost everything.

The following day, the snow had completely stopped. The large yard beyond the veranda was still covered in white and it glittered wondrously as the soft spring sun hit it.

I was lazy by nature. On a cold day like this, I would feel like founding an independent nation inside the kotatsu, but I sat on the veranda on this day.

My internal structure as a Zashiki Warashi had completely failed.

Not even I knew what effect it would have on me. Not even visiting a specialist in spiritual medicine was likely to help. Not even your average underground business could handle a Youkai that had the essence of Hyakki Yakou stuffed into her and then had it take severe damage.

Even just losing my power related to fortune or destiny would hurt.

It was possible this would affect my ability to maintain my body that was not bound by the laws of physics.

I could be destroyed or I could eternally suffer without any way to be destroyed. The fear of such things could cause my mind to fall apart. This was the fear of not knowing what would happen. Just because I was fine one day did not mean I would be the next. I would have to live while praying as if crossing an old suspension bridge.

I did not know how long I would be able to continue seeing this scene, so I committed it to memory as if burning it into my mind.

It was a ritual.

But then a clattering of dishes interrupted my peaceful and pessimistic ritual. I looked over and saw Shinobu carrying his breakfast tray with as dangerous a grip as ever.

“Yukari, you can’t eat alone, so let’s eat together.”

The same sentiment as before softened my cheeks.

Shinobu, Nagisa, the other children whose organs had been taken, and even the sick children who had undergone illegal surgeries had all been forcibly saved.

This result was the one bright side of the situation.

It seemed Hayabusa had found the silly human behind it, so none of the evil remained.

I hesitantly stood up from the veranda to move into the altar room where my breakfast was ready. I did not know how much strength I could use, so I would need to thoroughly test my upper limits at some point. For the moment, the lack of any pain was the most disturbing and frightening part. Rather than making me think I was fine, it made me think I was in a state similar to losing my sense of pain from damaging the spine.

“Hurry, Yukari. The food’ll get cold.”

“Wait, Shinobu. Walk more slowly.”

“Hm? What is it? Is there some food you don’t like? You’re supposed to eat everything, but don’t worry! If it’s too bad, I’ll save you.”

His innocent words made me smile quietly.

That’s right.

“Perhaps you really will save me someday.”

Part 19

In the present, the evening was filled with the stuffy heat of late summer. A high school boy had his hair dyed blonde, had his legs impolitely crossed, held a popsicle in his mouth, and looked in annoyance at a few envelopes that appeared to contain love letters. A Zashiki Warashi gave a heavy sigh as she looked at him.

“Shinobu, I am really disappointed.”

“Wait a second. Where the hell did that come from?”

Notes

1. ↑ Warashi means child.
2. ↑ Japanese for porcupinefish literally means “a thousand needles”.

Chapter 2: Hishigami Enbi // The Present Fluctuates Freely

Part 1

“Takenoko takenoko nyokiki!!”

“First nyoki!!”

“First nyoki!!”

“Nya ha ha! You were taken out right off the bat!”

“It’s a bit of an old game, so I forget how to play it☆”

A group of five men and five women on a group date was having the time of their lives at a table a short distance away. They must have been drinking a fair bit of alcohol because they were roaring with laughter at conversations that did not seem even remotely funny to me. Nevertheless, their laughter reached the table my sister and I were eating and drinking at.

Hmm.

For this twintailed middle school girl of the Hishigami family, a bar with only dim indirect lighting was a new experience. It made me wonder if I should really be there. Still, I hadn’t ordered any alcohol and my adult sister was across the table from me, so no one was going to warn me away or anything.

“There’s nothing on this menu but greasy meat. I don’t think this kind of food is right for a farming race with length to spare in their intestines.”

My sister was a large-breasted woman in her twenties who still wore a tank top and hot pants. She held a glass filled to the brim with spirytus (a harsh drink that could do just fine fueling an alcohol lamp) and frowned as she replied to me.

“They have salads down at the bottom.”

“What kind of salad has ‘plenty of beef tongue’!? The vegetables clearly aren’t the primary part of these dishes! A girl with lots of subcutaneous fat can’t carelessly eat this kind of thing.”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. You’re in middle school, aren’t you? At your age, your metabolism won’t leave any fat behind. Did an instigator of some kind of health boom scare you on TV or something? And if you're that worried, just take a run after eating."

"That may work for you, but you're a monster that chases after an Italian sports car to drag some villain out of it."

"I only managed that because it was a winding road on a mountain ridge. I couldn't do it on a straight city road."

The fact that she thought that showed she was normal proved just how much of a monster she was. At any rate, she was someone I didn't want involved in the schedule mysteries that were fun for their logic.

Meanwhile, excited voices were still coming from the other table.

"Huh? You've only been ordering oolong tea, haven't you?"

"No, no. I'm fine. This has shochu in it."

"You don't have to say that. If you don't drink, just say so. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I won't force you to drink, so don't worry. Nya ha ha ha ha!!"

While the voices sometimes jumped up in volume and stabbed into my ears, I reached for the large plate of beans.

Munch, munch.

"Ahh, edamame is delicious. I think these have to rank at #1."

"No, that would be dadachamame. And do you insist on only eating vegetables!? What's this!? Is my sister actually a girl or something!?"

"Of course I am!! And what's with that fried beef!? Girls are supposed to think even chicken is too greasy!"

"Sorry, but it's looking like I have a big job coming up. Once it begins, I don't know when I'll next get any proper human food, so I want to fill my head with as many memories of civilization as I can."

"Oh, is that so? I've got a troublesome issue at hand too."

My sister winked while downing the clear liquid with 90%+ alcohol content as if it were cool water.

"Let's hope we don't run into each other."

"That's for sure. If two Hishigami women ended up involved in a single incident, it would feel like the end of the world. I'd imagine everything would get resolved, but no one involved would be around to tell the tale."

"I'll be right back. I need to go to the bathroom!" said someone from the other table.

"Oh? Guys don't use some kind of euphemism there?"

"Eh? Do you seriously say you're off to pick flowers? I thought that was an urban legend."

A young man in a business suit stood up from that table.

Due to the layout, he approached our table and so I spoke up.

"Detective, what are you doing here?"

The instant I did, the man in the cheap suit froze in place. That detective from Investigation Department 1 of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department slowly turned toward me like a doll needing to be oiled. He was Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa and he was single. An unpleasant sweat covered the expression of a man who had just made the worst mistake of his life.

And he suddenly tried to cry his way out of it.

"Noooooooooooo!! I'm not asking why you two are here! I'm just not!! Let's keep to ourselves here, okay? I really don't get a chance like this often!! Pleeeeeeeease!!"

"Detective, your friend Enbi-chan here has the kind heart of the Virgin Mary, so I won't count this as cheating on me. …But only if you kiss me right here and now."

"Enough nonsense! Just promise me!! A police detective has a harder time meeting women than a uniformed police officer! Even people who haven't done anything wrong shut me out because they say I look too scary! But this time is different. There's a flight attendant who kindly reached out to me!! This is the only paid vacation left, but she went out of her way to schedule this on my day off! If I miss this chance, it's all over! My days of youth will end and I'll be a lonely middle-aged man instead!! So please!!"

You're supposed to be a police detective, so what on earth are you talking about?

Of course, a normal love life was impossible for this man. Even on his day off, he wasn't drinking. It was probably his way of making sure he was ready if something did happen.

Also…

"Detective, it pains me to say it, but I don't have to do anything here. It's already too late."

"Don't be so ominous!! Mai, stop your sister's rampage here!!"

"(Sparkle, sparkle, sparkle.)"

"What's with that glitter in your eyes!? You want to destroy this group date and cause a commotion just for fun, don't you!? I won't let you! I won't! Defense!! Defense!!"

"Detective, look over here."

I diverted my future darling's eyes as he posed like a basketball player for no reason.

"Your cell phone is going to receive an emergency call soon. This fun love comedy part of the night will end without our interference. So let's go dive headfirst into the serious and bloody suspense part of the night☆"

"Please wait!! Let me recover my energy! I'll break otherwise. I really, really will!"

"Sure, sure. But the countdown has already begun. Three, two, one."

Zero.

At that moment, his cell phone produced a normal ring tone.

He brought it to his ear in annoyance and a grim male voice came out.

It was the chief of Department 1.

"You have a case, Uchimaku. You're back on duty, so get to the scene."

“………………………………………………………………………………………………
Me no speak Japanese.”

“I already know you’re just about the biggest idiot out there, so you don’t have to remind me. I’ll send the details in an email.”

The detective then reached for the glass on our table.

More specifically, he grabbed the glass my sister had been using and gulped down the clear liquid inside.

“Ah! My spirytus!”

“Gwaaaaaahhh!? You got an indirect kiss with hiiiiiiiiiimmmmmmm!?”

He completely ignored our shouts.

“Bh!? Spiry-gwah!?” he choked.

He was immediately left unsteady on his feet as he spoke into the cell phone.

“I can’t, chief! I’m out drinking right now!! I’d love to make a dashing entry, but unfortunately, a police officer can’t exactly drink and drive.”

“Take a cab. And no, we won’t reimburse you for the fare.”

The call ended there and the detective remained motionless.

Completely motionless.

Part 2

There was only one kind of case an off-duty police detective would be called to.

Plenty of incidents both large and small occurred in Tokyo on a daily basis, but it was not often they were sent straight to the metropolitan police and had off-duty detectives called in. This clearly had some kind of dangerous circumstances that brought it behind a normal incident.

I lent my shoulder to the detective who was about to collapse from something other than the alcohol and I spoke my thoughts as we waited for a taxi to pass by the nighttime street.

“In Odaiba, the idol group Tarot Girls 22 was having a live broadcast event as guests on an internet radio show, but a man burned himself to death. It may be called net radio, but they tend to have videos these days, so the footage of the human pillar of fire’s death throes was sent all around the world.”

“Why do you know all this?

“I said it was a live broadcast, didn’t I? This isn’t classified police information. The broadcast station has apparently stopped transmitting the footage, but it’s everywhere on the video sharing sites. Every message board I’ve looked at is filled with dangerously titled threads.”

“Ugh…”

“But when I say this was net radio, I don’t mean it was a studio rented out by amateurs. It’s a division and subsidiary of Japan’s most well-known national broadcast station. The top levels of the station were afraid newspapers and TV wouldn’t be necessary in five years’ time, so they bought up a successful netventure to gain the knowhow. It was less a way of gaining actual profits and more preparations for dealing with the new age that would weed them out. Think of it like an investment to learn about the enemy.”

The combination of a drunk man in a suit and a middle school girl must have been a problem because we didn’t seem able to catch a taxi.

“The victim was a twenty-four year old man named Usuta Manabu. He was on the net radio’s sound staff, but he was a freelancer with a bottom-level position. It isn’t known if he left any kind of will behind. From what I’ve seen on the video sites, he dumped a plastic bottle of a flammable liquid over his head and set himself ablaze with a lighter. It might have been an organic solvent for paints that isn’t as flashy as gasoline. Art staff could easily bring some into even a heavily-guarded TV station, so there would probably have been some lying around for Usuta to grab.”

“That’s…hic…sad to hear. He probably regretted his decision as soon as he lit it.”

“Probably. The weak flames from a solvent take a while to kill you. Then again, there wasn’t much hope of saving him once he was entirely engulfed in the flames. If he was going to go that far, he should have prepared some gasoline and died a less painful death. That might have killed him instantly and wouldn’t have lasted longer than a few minutes.”

Incidentally, the detective’s Investigation Department 1 had a section dedicated to fires. It was a bit of a stretch to say a suicide qualified, but the special circumstances of this case kept anyone from immediately labelling it a “mere suicide”.

The spread of the flames to the broadcast station’s equipment and the interrupted live broadcast would likely be treated as more important than the man’s death.

In the worst case, it could be registered as arson against the station rather than suicide.

If that happened, Usuta Manabu would be treated as a perpetrator rather than a victim. Of course, it was a lot the same when a train hit someone. The focus was always more on the delayed schedule and cost of the damage than on the person killed.

It was said that the law prioritized public welfare over the circumstances of individuals, but it was important to remember that was harsher than it sounded.

“Then what are saying?” asked the detective with a suspicious look in his eyes. “Some grotesque footage that violates the broadcast code might bring social unrest, so the well-known Department 1 has to send all its forces out to quickly fix it? Hic.”

“Well, it was a net broadcast, so the codes don’t really apply and I’m not sure if the Broadcast Something-Or-Other Committee will do anything about the scandal. Then again, this was related to a subsidiary of a national broadcast station, so who knows.”

We finally caught a taxi.

I stuffed the detective into the back seat and then sat next to him.

The middle-aged female driver looked displeased when I told her we needed to get to the broadcast station in Odaiba.

“What’s this? Are you trying to get a peek at tonight’s hottest murder scene? Sorry, but I can’t let you do that. If you’re just interested in what doesn’t concern you, I’ll refuse to drive you.”

“He’s a detective from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and I’m a freelancer, so we need to get there ASAP to solve the case.”

“What’s this!? You mean *the* Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department? And what do mean by a freelancer!? Sh-should I be getting your autographs or something!?”

God, how annoying!! You’re the one that’s too interested in what doesn’t concern you!!

The detective who reeked of alcohol was of little use.

“Hic. Anyway…can you get going?”

“Sure, sure. This is when you ask me to follow that car, right!? I’m on it!!”

The woman seemed to be on a high because she drove us quite recklessly from the Shinbashi drinking district to Odaiba.

“Hic. By the way, driver.”

“What is it!? Ask me anything! Do you want to know about any suspicious passengers I’ve had!?”

“You called it a murder scene just now, didn’t you? What do you mean?”

“That’s what everyone’s saying. They say there’s no way it was just a suicide.”

Yes, yes.

Let Enbi-chan handle that one.

“The social unrest you mentioned before might not be too far off. This is going to be more than just dealing with a suicide.”

“What?”

“Every message board out there has a flood of posts coming in, but there’s clear malice mixed in at a pretty good frequency. A lot of people are saying there was nothing wrong with the sound staff member and his suicide was caused by something else.”

“Something else? You mean like someone assisted or instigated the suicide?”

“I told you the guest was Tarot Girls 22, remember? They’re the most popular national idol group right now and it seems the blame is spreading to them. People are saying they’re cursed or that a woman’s cries are mixed in with their latest song.”

“Hee hee hee☆ The mystery voice on the CD, huh?” added the driver.

“Well, it’s a common urban legend.”

The TV industry had a way of gathering occult stories. Some would say everyone related to the production of a certain advertisement was meeting bizarre deaths one after another, some would say they caught a glimpse of a corpse floating in the pond behind the reporter in the instant they switched to the outside camera on the weather forecast, and some would say a porn video was playing after the station’s broadcast time had ended.

One genre of those was the mystery voice on a CD. Those rumors usually said a female screaming or crying was recorded along with the artist’s voice. There were a few famous songs with that rumor.

“So instead of Tarot Girls 22 being caught up in the sound staff member’s suicide, those people think the sound staff member was killed due to the problems surrounding Tarot Girls 22.”

“Do you think that’s possible?”

“It’s hard to say.”

If this was a fictional mystery novel, I would have laughed and said it was obviously some kind of clever trick made to look like the curse had done it, but unfortunately, *this world was filled with irregular beings known as Youkai.*

Not that this was any time to give a proud snort and say something as obvious as “truth is stranger than fiction”.

“Was it a suicide or something more? Was it done entirely by human hands or was an elusive Youkai involved? And if a Youkai was involved, was it an intentional act of the Youkai’s or was a human using its power via a Package? We have no choice but to investigate every possibility.”

However, I could only glean so much information from the excited message boards and video sharing sites. Without heading to the scene of the crime and investigating myself, I couldn’t even plan what to do next.

The taxi crossed a brightly lit bridge.

“Would it really be that hard to just seal off this bridge?”

“Try learning a thing or two about economics.”

“I bet I could get it immediately sealed off by attaching a kitchen timer to a cylindrical container, duct-taping it to the bottom of the bridge, and calling the police.”

“Hic. Do that and you’re on your own.”

Once we had crossed the bridge, we were on obviously reclaimed land.

There was a large-scale park and shopping mall, but it still looked like a kingdom ruled by a ridiculously huge national TV station. From one end of the rectangular area of reclaimed land to the other, it all looked like an unreal TV set.

I was pretty sure the area had lately had an Edo-style revival campaign. They had tried to raise the water quality of Tokyo Bay to properly bring back the old Edo-style sushi or something like that.

The word “ecological” tended to make people think of being less wasteful, but the introduction of new facilities for the environment had placed industrial complexes all along the bay’s coast. Madoka had likely been delighted with all the money and rights being traded around.

The woman driver then asked a question.

“Where should I stop? Will the shopping mall’s parking lot work?”

“We’ve got an actual police officer with us, so there’s no need to hold back. Pull right up to the front of the TV station like a VIP’s limo.”

“Heh heh. I’ve always wanted to do that.”

I don’t know where she learned how to do it, but the tires screeched as she brought the taxi around the front entrance circle.

Despite how late it was, the area was filled with people.

Irritated security guards were keeping normal people from entering, but they could not keep the media away. And a close glance showed one young man carrying a camera with the TV station’s own logo. I guessed they had been unable to stop the flood of people after the following scenario played out: Their own reporters made their way in → Why does that station get in and no one else? → This isn’t fair! It’s a violation of the freedom of the press!!

The showy arrival of the taxi was met by the bright stroboscopic flashing of the SLR cameras.

They took picture after picture hoping it was a famous celebrity, a station VIP, someone related to the incident, or just anyone they could sell to a sports newspaper later.

But it turned out to be none of those.

Okay!! It’s time for the arrival of the (future) most lovey-dovey couple in the world!!

As for Police Sergeant Uchimaku’s reaction upon getting out of the back seat…

“Yay!! Are you getting some good shots? Hello, everyone! Or should I say good evening? Department 1 is on the scene!! Ugh. Oh, no. Here it comes… Oehhhhhhhhh!?”

Oh, dear.

I hope this shocking footage isn’t released so soon after the suicide by burning.

Part 3

Tarot Girls 22 was the most popular idol group in Japan.

As their name suggested, their primary group was made up of 22 girls from the Fool to the Universe. They also had a second group of 56 girls that had 14 each of Wands, Cups, Swords, and Coins.

They could be seen as the first of the fusion of beautiful girls and occult mysteries that were common in idols these days. Some people had gained an odd popularity through fortune telling and spiritualism and this was the result of the already-popular idol industry taking that in for themselves.

The most distinguishing feature of Tarot Girls 22 was how they were divided between the Major Arcana group and the Minor Arcana group, but the members were always split up and rearranged for a new song release or a national tour.

Each member represented a tarot card and the optimal card arrangement for the day's work determined the participating unit, so which group they were in made little difference. The way the idols were used without taking into account their individual popularity or sales helped increase their "credibility" from a spiritual standpoint.

The choreography of their dancing and their positions on stage during concerts all had tarot meanings included, so after any event, enthusiastic fans known as Arcana Readers would give their personal interpretations on video sites or message boards. Of course, sometimes intense "religious disputes" would break out.

"Well?"

We entered the TV station and the detective seemed to be feeling better after vomiting a spectacular amount, so he asked me a question.

"Hic. How did some suspicious mystery freak get into a heavily guarded national TV station that's been designated a possible terrorist target?"

"Try actually reading the documents. I'm from Bug Breakers! Some young help was called in as an emergency worker to search for bugs set up in the station☆"

"You're setting up your own bugs while pretending to look for them, aren't you? Ugh…. And then you 'find' them so they trust you."

"Bugs aren't illegal if you just carry them around with you. I'm never even switching them on."

In truth, I had to begin by using cold reading to make them believe their most important information was being leaked out, so it could be a lot of trouble.

The detective looked annoyed and doubt gradually appeared on his face.

"Wait a sec. Ugh. When did you begin preparing for this? It couldn't have been after the suicide. Hic."

"And that means this began before that."

"Before that?"

"A part of it did anyway. Want to hear about it?"

I attached earphones to my smartphone and put one half in his ear.

Eh heh heh. I've always wanted to share a set of earphones like this!

"Ugh. What is this?"

"Tarot Girls 22's latest song. It's titled Summer Vacation, Again and Again. Shh. Listen carefully at 1:55."

At that moment, he clearly frowned.

It sounded like silk being torn.

No, it sounded like a young woman had someone grab her by the legs and tear her entire body in two. That was how ghastly the scream mixed in with the song was.

"Let me ask again. Hic. What is this?"

"Who can say? The rumor online is that Tarot Girls 22 angered something best left undisturbed by using spiritualism for their business. For a while, strange phenomena have been occurring around them and this is just one of them.”

“Are you serious?”

“If a single person’s grudge would do things as obvious as this like on an insane spiritual TV special, no one would need people like us. Things are different with a collection of grudges that takes form as a Youkai, though.”

As we whispered to each other, a young female staff member walked over to us. Her name was Akashi Mitsu. Her job title was assistant director, but she was actually just a part time worker and it seemed she would be showing us around.

“You are from the police, aren’t you? The scene is this way. Oh, Enbi-chan. What are you doing here?”

“Bug Breakers needs to do our thing before the inspection can begin☆ If the murderer set up a device before leaving, they can listen in on what the police are saying. And if they know what the initial investigation turned up, they can come up with a countermeasure.”

Akashi Mitsu-chan’s face grew obviously pale at my made-up excuse. She rudely bit at her thumbnail and quickly showed us down the hallway as if something was bothering her.

“(Hey, mystery freak. Hic. Are you kidding me here?)”

“(About what?)”

“(That AD didn’t even question it when you mentioned a murderer. Hic. I thought this was supposed to be a suicide.)”

“(Then do your best to catch up to me☆)”

Whether as an anti-terrorism measure or a way of keeping stalkers out, we did not head down a straight hallway and take a single elevator. The hallways took turn after turn and we repeatedly switched between elevators before finally reaching our destination.

We passed by people famous from TV a few times, but the detective wasn’t familiar enough with them to get excited. Or perhaps he was just that much of a professional despite being drunk. Either way, it was cute.

“Oh, Enbi-san.”

A girl leaving a kitchenette spoke to me and the detective actually stopped this time.

The fourteen-year-old girl was the member of Tarot Girls 22 corresponding to the Empress of the Major Arcana. Her body was quite well-developed for her age, but there was a heavy look across her entire face. It was as if she walked around with a label saying “At school, I’m the inconspicuous library committee member.”

Her name was Anemura Kaede.

As far as the mysterious suicide case was concerned, she was not all that important.

However, I was a bit interested in the fact that she had left the kitchenette alone.

“Where’s your usual manager?”

“You mean Itano-san?”

Just as she finished asking that, a woman in a suit poked her head out from the stairwell.

She was the Itano Ryou we were just discussing. She looked to be in her late twenties and she had a nice enough body and a beautiful enough face to make some money if she changed into a swimsuit, but she was far too unsociable for that.

Currently, she spoke quietly.

“Is there a refrigerator in the kitchenette? If not, we’ll have to head out to buy ice.”

“Oh, there is one. Are the other girls really doing that badly?”

“Two or three of them are still in complete shock after seeing that corpse. Although that may be better than the ones that are getting far too excited about it all.”

Hm.

Would that be the military-obsessed Chariot or the brown-skinned Sun?

It seemed some people had made inappropriate threads using the frightening footage of the suicide to vote which idol had the best reaction. When seeing a man burn himself to death, it seemed some people lost their cool and others kept up the mask of an idol. The question was which was more unnatural.

Meanwhile, Kaede-chan the Empress crossed her arms restlessly and asked a question. The shy girl may not have realized it, but the pose pushed her breasts up with her arms.

“Um… How long do I have to stay here?”

“Oh, can you not relax at the scene of a suicide? There’s a futon in the dressing room, but you could probably relax more back at home.”

“Um, there is that, but it’s been several hours since it happened. Just staying in the station this late makes it hard to relax.”

“?”

Akashi-chan the AD opened her cell phone and let out a scream.

“Oh, crap! It’s this late!? I think I’m violating the Labor Standards Act!!”

“Come to think of it, should you be working this late, Enbi-san?”

“This doesn’t fall under the category of ‘labor’. If you’re a volunteer, you can slip through all sorts of loopholes. Help me out, detective.”

As I spoke, I pointed to the detective’s chest with my thumb.

The lovely young man in a suit responded halfheartedly to my demand for an explanation.

“Eh? If the police are keeping you here to help, hic, you won’t be punished even if you stay too long. Um… How far did I get? If you aren’t being paid, it doesn’t violate the Labor Standards Act. Hic.”

But something else surprised Kaede-chan the Empress.

“Eh? Um… He’s a police detective? But he looks like he’s drunk.”

“Yeah… If you’ve got a problem with it, I can always leave. In fact, I’d much rather leave. This was supposed to be my day off! Hic!!”

“You still haven’t gotten over that horrible group date? It clearly wasn’t going anywhere.”

“Hic hic!!”

“Um… Why is he crying?”

Either because this completely went against their image of a police officer or because a middle school girl like me was being so friendly with him, the AD and the Empress looked utterly shocked.

“I or one of the other officers should explain the situation to you later. Hic. If there’re no problems, please remain in the building. Ugh, I feel sick.”

“Oh, yes. Please make it quick if you can. I don’t want to miss school tomorrow too.”

Manager Itano Ryou glared at Kaede-chan the Empress before speaking.

“Anemura-san, as I said before, stay away from the dressing room for the moment. As the single calm girl, the panicked girls could easily snap at you.”

We left that show business pair and once more started toward the scene of the incident.

Just hearing the term internet radio made one think of a small recording studio and mixer room separated by soundproof glass, but this had been a live broadcast event with an audience. They seemed to have rented out an entire event studio used for song shows on television.

Having someone burn themselves to death during such a major performance had likely been a complete disaster for the producers.

The entire stage was sealed off with yellow tape, but the audience seating was not. What appeared to be a forensics team was already taking photos and checking for fingerprints and footprints with chemicals. I was apparently not the only one trying to get a look at it all because a girl with slender pants under her miniskirt tried to get some photos, had her cell phone confiscated by a uniformed police officer, and was now jumping up and down as he held it just out of her reach.

Isn’t that Eternity of the Major Arcana?

As I approached the scorched-smelling stage, I called out to the detective.

“The victim, Usuta Manabu, was a member of the sound staff.”

“You already told me that in the taxi. Hic.”

A blackened mass sat near the right wing of the stage. Right from the perspective of the audience, that is. It was curled up in the fetal position and was the Usuta Manabu I had mentioned. In life, he had been a chubby young man and the vestiges of that of that could still be seen in his corpse. Of course, that was nothing more than the yellow and half-cooked fat sticking out from his blackened skin.

The floor was burnt black for about three meters around the corpse.

“What do you think?”

“Hm? From the state of the body, the flames must not have been all that strong. A sprinkler probably could have put them out. Hic. The stage floor was waxed until it shined. That’s why the flames spread there.”

The detective went ahead and lifted up the yellow tape and stepped onto the stage.

I, on the other hand, sat in a front-row seat like an audience member.

“There was no room for any kind of trick in this case. The live worldwide broadcast proves that. He suddenly interrupted the event by running out from the right wing of the stage, dumped a plastic bottle full of liquid over his head, and ignited it with a cheap lighter.”

“We still can’t say that for sure. Burp. The flammable substance could have been dumped on him backstage and he ran out onto the stage to escape. Maybe the bottle only contained water.”

“That doesn’t explain the lighter.”

“It could’ve been a prank. Hic. He could have been pretending to kill himself to surprise everyone, but it ended up actually setting him alight. Hic. It’s possible the man didn’t know the bottle contained a flammable substance.”

"If that's the case, we won't find anything investigating the scene."

I tried crossing my legs in the seat, but the detective refused to be seduced.

"But it might not a bad idea to look into."

"?"

"Usuta Manabu had borrowed money from several different consumer moneylenders. In other words, he had a lot of debt."

"You mean he had a motive for suicide? Hic. What about it?"

"There was suspicion surrounding him before this. People said he gathered and sold information on scandals concerning the station's performers to pay back his ridiculous amount of debt."

"And what does that have to do with the suicide?"

"This has created a scandal for the national idol group Tarot Girls 22."

"…"

He seemed to reflexively turn toward me in the audience seating.

"Do you really mean that?"

"There were a few signs."

With my legs still crossed, I shrugged my shoulders like a foreigner.

"For example, the voice on the CD mentioned in the taxi. Usuta Manabu was a freelance member of the sound staff, so he could have snuck the scream into the song and spread the rumor online. But it didn't work. No matter how many times he scattered the sparks, the flames wouldn't spread. And as his situation grew worse and worse, he finally-…"

"That doesn't add up. Hic. If he was setting up the scandal to save himself, why would he kill himself to create the scandal? Hic. That doesn't make sense."

"Ih oh ai ah. Ih ih ee oh-ee ay oo ay ee."

"What?"

“People have read his lips just before his world broadcast suicide scene. He was shouting something, but his voice couldn’t be heard. What I just said were the vowel sounds read from his lip movements, but if you run through all possible patterns with a program to find a text that actually means something in Japanese, you get…”

I had gone to some effort to get this info, so I made sure to put on a bit of a show.

“It’s not my fault. This is the only way to save me.”

“Was he afraid of something? But…”

“It doesn’t feel like a suicide anymore, does it? Maybe he was trying to burn the Tarot Girls 22 to death but his hand slipped and he covered himself in flames instead.”

“But this isn’t connecting back to a scandal for them anymore.”

“Oh, isn’t it? There are rumors about strange phenomena occurring around those idols. Like the voice on the CD. A lot of people online are calling Usuta Manabu a victim. They’re saying someone who wants to eliminate the Tarot Girls 22 possessed him in order to attack them. In that case, it’s like a forged email and he’s a victim being treated like the perpetrator.”

“Hic. It’s certainly a possibility, and it certainly seems like a popular theory at the moment.”

“Regardless, it’s almost certain that Usuta said ‘this is the only way to save me’. Whether suicide or attempted murder, it was brought on by extreme fear. …And that makes me interested in what that fear was.”

“If he had a lot of debt from consumer moneylenders, burp, I would assume shady thugs.”

“Perhaps, but there are some interesting rumors about Tarot Girls 22. To give credibility as a fusion of idols and spiritualism, they’ve filmed PVs in a few spiritual locations. The rumor is that the strange phenomena are following them because they angered some kind of dangerous Youkai.”

“Youkai? What kind?”

“A relatively new and deadly one that was first confirmed during the Meiji era. It dresses as a farmer, appears in villages of the Tohoku region, and kills children. Even though no one ever sees it abduct the children, rumors later appear that it was seen in different places a day or two before. It’s a type of pure fear that causes that sort of mass hysteria.”

“Just get to the answer.”

“It’s called the *Aburatori*. Have you ever heard of it, detective?”

Part 4

“Is Tarot Girls 22 really cursed?”

“They were filming PVs at spiritual locations to help sell their spiritual image. They were treading on famous suicide spots in swimsuits.”

“It’s called the Aburatori, right? I hear they couldn’t finish their pinup photo shoots because a strange blurry shadow appeared in the frame.”

“Oh, you mean the one that appeared to say hi from between Nabiki-chan the Hermit’s breasts of all places?”

“And now someone’s actually died because of it. But I’m sure they’ll keep doing it because they want those sales numbers. Is the stuff in convenience stores not enough for purification salt? Is there some special way to make that?”

After listening to that much, I shut down the audio app on my smart phone.

Those were the conversations I had recorded while sitting in the café at the shopping mall attached to the TV station. Day or night, the people of the station always needed caffeine, so you had a good chance of finding conversations of those involved at a nearby café.

“But there’s nothing useful in there.”

The involvement of a Youkai called an Aburatori could also be found in the many comments on internet message boards.

I heard a sparrow chirping outside the window.

Is it morning already?

Light gradually filled the room that contained nothing but case files. It had no refrigerator, no microwave, and no sink. Then again, the first floor of the building contained a convenience store and a 24-hour leisure spa was only a 100 meter walk away.

I had yet to find a real clue on the case and I wouldn’t be able to focus on my classes if I went to school like this.

I decided to skip school and focus on the case.

And that meant there was a possibility of running into the detective again. I hadn't slept at all, but I needed to carefully groom myself.

Just to be clear, girls didn't take such long baths because they soaked until they were boiled red.

In order to visit the leisure spa, I grabbed my usual bath set and also operated my smartphone.

I had to tell at least one classmate I was skipping.

But thirty seconds after that email, the phone rang.

"Hey, Tomoe. You clearly don't know how to use a cell phone if you're replying to an email with a phone call."

"That's because you sent me such a weird email. You're skipping again? What are you up to?"

I wanted to tell her it was a problem as big as the incident she had been a part of, but I swallowed the words. I could be so kind.

"Oh, right. Despite how you look, you're into the popular groups like Tarot Girls 22, right? Do you know anything fun about that?"

"What do you mean despite how I look? And the internet's having a field day with that suicide. They're all saying 'it was like this before', 'it's always been like this', or 'I knew this was happening from the beginning' even though they only thought this stuff up five seconds ago."

"Yeah. No one knows what's accurate anymore."

"And the Tarot Girls 22 aren't all that bad. You never hear about them getting caught smoking or with boyfriends. But the internet is ganging up on them and saying that's actually creepy."

Heh.

That's the thing, Tomoe. Just like there's no such thing as a pure evil villain, doesn't a completely pure idol seem kind of suspicious?

With 78 of them in all, there are going to be fights and I'm sure at least one of them would get into some kind of trouble. And yet there have been exactly zero incidents.

"I wonder if Mio likes that kind of thing," continued Tomoe. "She looks quiet and she's good at dancing."

"What's Tsumada Mio doing now?"

"She's going to school like normal. I don't know if it's an *aftereffect*, but it seems people sometimes forget she exists. Still, she says she's generally getting along well."

After finishing the conversation, I hung up.

Now, then.

I had two things to look into: Tarot Girls 22 and the loan sharks that the suicide victim named Usuta Manabu had borrowed money from.

It was only a trivial connection, but due to the previous conversation, I decided to start with Tarot Girls 22.

Part 5

“Hello, this is Hishigami Enbi-chan of Bug Busters. Have you noticed anything out of the ordinary since last time? Maybe a bit of static in a cell phone call or momentary dip in quality on your TV?”

While stirring up fear by mentioning natural phenomena that occurred at least once a day in any home, I slipped past the muscular guard and into the staff entrance. They must have been interested in tech or the underworld because the ponytailed High Priestess and the gothic lolita Death watched me with a glitter in their eyes.

I was not in Odaiba’s Hachi TV.

This was a giant company building in the coastal area of Shinbashi. The entire twenty-story building was owned by Tarot Girls 22, so it was quite a spectacle.

The many elevators were completely divided between two systems. One system only travelled between floors one to ten and the other only travelled between floors eleven to twenty. The lower floors contained a gym, an editing room, a photo studio, and other facilities for external staff while the upper floors contained the legal and management offices for internal staff.

“Oh, Enbi-san.”

As I tried to decide where to investigate first, Anemura Kaede-chan the Empress poked her head out from around a corner.

She must have been in the middle of some sort of practice because she wore a tank top and short pants that left her midriff completely exposed. To make them easier to move in, they were made of a material that stretched easily, but that made it look like she was wearing sports underwear.

“What are you doing here today?”

“Making a quick check for bugs. If I don’t make unscheduled visits at random intervals, someone could remove the bugs on the inspection day and escape detection.”

You probably already know this, but the whole bugs thing was a bluff meant to get me close to the people involved in the case. This had nothing to do with the case, so don't get confused.

Kaede-chan the Empress walked down the hallway with me and we passed by two girls holding a lid on a cup of noodles. The slender one in a black pantsuit and a monocle was the Magician and I was fairly certain the one who was secretly suspected to be a trap was the Magic. I was surprised to find even idols ate cup noodles.

"They're probably on their way to be filmed for a behind-the-scenes video."

Kaede-chan was incredibly blunt.

Both the lower floors and upper floors were worth investigating, but I decided to go with the lower floors since Kaede-chan was being talkative. I spoke up while walking alongside her.

"That's quite the outfit there."

"Eh? Oh. The choreography person said it was easier to see the charm of our own dancing if we can see the movements of our muscles in the mirror."

We were on our way to the dance floor on the fifth floor.

However, this was not some outdated club. It really was a place to practice dancing. It had an empty flat floor with two adjacent walls covered with giant mirrors. Ten or more of the Tarot Girls 22 would dance at a time, so they needed a large space to practice.

I had investigated the place a few times already, but I hadn't found anything strange.

Needless to say, there were no bugs or hidden cameras anywhere.

"We're on a break right now, so it would probably be best if you finished your check before practice starts up again."

"Probably."

Three other girls were gathered at one end of the room in the same outfit as Kaede-chan. They were bickering and playing a handheld game system…no, a smartphone app. I could hear quite a few clicked tongues from where I was, so they seemed very irritated.

Destiny with her twirling ringlet curls was in the center with Desire, the older sister type, and the Star, the hesitant small creature type, gathered around her.

“Everyone gets antsy before a concert, so try not to provoke them.”

There were posters here and there on the walls for something called the Autumn Happy Self Festival.

Wow. Not only is it sponsored by Hachi TV and Hishigami Auto, it lists Madoka’s name too. How much does she sponsor under her own name?

“Where’s that being held? You’re using a new place I assume.”

“Y-yes. It’s at the Toyosu Outdoor Concert Hall. I think they said something about it being recently built for the…Edo-style revival, was it?”

“This says the concerts begin the day after tomorrow.”

“It’s not as bad as a national tour, but we have performances morning, noon, and night for three days straight. That’s nine in all, so we’ll collapse if we don’t gather strength like a bear before hibernation.”

“Sounds tough. Anyway, I’ll make a quick check for bugs.”

Hm.

Nothing, just like before.

But that means it’s time to see if anything has changed after that suicide.

As I thought that, my smartphone rang.

Oh, how unusual. It’s my beloved darling, Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa.

“What is it, detective?”

“You usually pop up when I’m investigating, so I’m surprised you’re not here.”

“Heh heh heh. Can you not calm down without me there?”

“It scares me when someone as creepy as you does something out of the ordinary.”

Hee hee. He's so shy.

…

He is being shy, right?

"I'm in Usuta Manabu's apartment and this place is horrible. The rooms on either side are empty. The debt collectors must have been really violent because his front door is so dented that it took me a second to figure out how to open it."

"And?"

"I've found a few pieces of evidence pointing to his strange actions. The walls of the room are crammed full of tiny writing, he has an undecipherable journal, and there's blood in the bathroom drain. The blood is his, so he may have slit his wrist."

"But they're all too obvious. They're like hints for children."

"I thought it was an act at first too. He was using his ability to enter the station to search out scandals, right? I thought he was setting things up so he could go for an insanity plea if he was caught. …But that isn't what this is. It may have started that way, but it's gone beyond an act. It looks like he wasn't able to stop his own actions."

"Still," I said with an exasperated sigh. "Even from outside, there were signs of debt collectors kicking at his door, right? Why didn't he call the police? The level of interest had to be illegal. Even if the amount he borrowed remained, he maybe could have eliminated the interest that kept piling up."

"That's the thing. I had an expert in profiling look at the insane interior of his apartment, and…"

"I have to ask. This wasn't a beautiful investigator with a nice body, was it? Take my jealously lightly and you'll regret it later."

"I'm going to ignore that nonsense. Anyway, according to that expert, Usuta Manabu was apparently driven into a state of mind where he couldn't tell anyone else about the disastrous state of his life even if he wanted to. It's what you call psychological abuse."

"…"

"It's the same thing that keeps children or the elderly from leaving the house when they're being abused. They're not handcuffed or anything, but they can't move. No matter how horribly they're treated, they can't fight back. Even if they're deprived of food and grow weak, they just accept it without even crying out. Usuta Manabu was in that state, so he felt cornered and unable to consult anyone about it."

"Wait a second."

I slowly crouched down while holding the phone to my ear.

I looked like I was peering under an invisible bed and Anemura Kaede-chan watched me in confusion.

"Detective, you said that term refers to a state where you can't leave a building despite not being chained there?"

"Yes."

"What were you picturing when you thought about it? The Hungry Ghost Case where a woman starved to death while locked in a room filled with food she had been convinced was poisoned? Or the Avici Case where a man destroyed his own body trying to tunnel through a concrete wall by hand because he had been convinced the door would not open and that was his only choice?"

"I'd rather not remember those."

"The representative example of psychological abuse is being unable to leave a building, but on a smaller scale, it could limit the target to a room or a bathtub, right? Criminals have enjoyed robbing the victim of their freedom like that in past cases."

"What about it?"

"I found something like that here."

According to my classmate Tomoe, Tarot Girls 22 had such perfect behavior that they were never caught smoking or with a boyfriend.

But there were 22 of the Major Arcana and 56 of the Minor Arcana. This was a large group of 78 girls in all which was two school classes' worth. It was only natural for some kind of fight or trouble to crop up. If there was none of that whatsoever, there had to be some kind of restraint.

And I had found a trace of it.

It had not been there before. After that suicide, the number of traces had increased as if to tighten control over the organization.

In this case, it was a sticky residue as if some kind of tape had been laid out along the floor.

It was shaped like an L and it was placed in four spots.

If the four Ls were thought of as the corners of a shape, it created a square with two meter sides.

It was a lot like a non-existent cage.

It was as if someone was reminding someone else of a fear or reapplying an invisible lock. It was as if they were attempting to bind the idols in a square space with no chains or locks.

“This is pretty similar.”

“…”

“This cage might be based on a past case. This reminds me of equipment used to artificially set up that psychological abuse to test it out.”

Part 6 (3rd person)

Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa had the fatal flaw of no cooking skills whatsoever despite living on his own. When he thought of a dinner, it was a pack of white rice heated in the microwave, pre-packaged salad or vegetables that were on sale, and miso soup that only needed hot water added.

So…

“Wait, wait, wait. Have we finally reached the age where mackerel tartare is on convenience store shelves? Now that I’ve seen this, I’ll be stuck with chazuke and sake tonight!!”

“Detective.”

“What’s this? Has the world started automatically throwing you in to cancel out anything good I happen to find? You haven’t attached a GPS tracker to me, have you?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. For someone who lives in Tokyo, you don’t know how to have fun. You stop by the same places every day, so it’s super easy to find you without an appointment.”

Another voice then cut in.

“Um, excuse me…”

“Hyah!?”

“Hyah!?”

Both of them jumped away and turned around to find a girl shrinking down as much as possible. Her clothes were plain, but she was Anemura Kaede the Empress of the Major Arcana.

“A-Anemura-san? Why are you here? This exhibitionist wasn’t dragging you around, was she?”

“Who do you think I’m wearing these kinds of clothes for!? If you’ve noticed, then fall for me already!!”

“If you realize those clothes are revealing, then please stop!!”

"N-no. I just happen to live near here."

After flinching back from the detective and mystery freak who moved further and further off topic, Anemura Kaede hesitantly opened her mouth.

Hishigami Enbi blinked a few times.

"Anyway, I'm surprised to see an idol from the biggest group out there uses a convenience store. And all alone too. You don't have a manager with you?"

"Ah ha ha. There are 78 of us, so there are ten of us to each manager. And they don't stick with us while at school or anything."

The idol poked at a pack of vegetable juice on the shelf.

"And they told us to assertively buy these cheap products."

"?"

"You haven't heard, Enbi-chan? The internet is full of veg-idol flaming right now."

"Oh, that."

Vegetable idol – or veg-idol for short – was a term for idols who advertised Intellectual Village tomatoes or pears by taking a big bite out of them with a smile.

Someone with too much time on their hands had calculated it out and posted the following on a message board: "Eh? We can never afford those high-quality vegetables, but how many of them do those idols eat in a year if you count unused takes? They eat them for free and get paid on top of that." That had done severe damage to the image of some idols.

"But isn't it dangerous?" asked Uchimaku while sounding legitimately curious. "Wouldn't people surround you and cause a huge panic if someone recognized you? Of course, it's the job of the police to deal with that kind of thing if it happens."

"Surprisingly, that doesn't happen. The Anemura Kaede everyone knows is covered in makeup, under a bright spotlight, and put together with camerawork where each and every instant has been calculated out. What makes everyone think I'm so special is only the product of what all the adults do."

"I see. But I think you're pretty enough how you are right now."

"Eh? Ah?"

Anemura Kaede looked completely taken aback by that unexpected response.

And for some reason, Hishigami Enbi began secretly jabbing her knee into the back of Uchimaku Hayabusa's hipbone, but the Empress did not notice.

The girl grabbed some vegetable juice and yogurt and gave a bit of a lonely smile.

"Also, the car my driver takes me around in is convenient and safe, but it's a little restrictive to only use that. When I ride my bicycle or take the train, I can blend into the background noise and forget all about the adults' system or the monster of numbers."

"?"

"I was the one that chose to do this and to come this far, so I shouldn't say its restricting me, should I?"

Part 7

That evening, the detective and I made our way to Hachi TV in Odaiba.

“Detective, why are we gathering here?”

“To review the technical term ‘psychological abuse’. Then again, I don’t remember asking you to come with me.”

As we wandered around outside the TV station’s entrance, the thick glass door with a man guarding it opened and a woman in her mid-twenties wearing a short dress and jeans walked out.

When she saw the detective, she gave a childlike smile and waved at him. I spotted the glittering of a ring on her left ring finger.

“Hey there, Hayabusa-kun. I haven’t seen you since you had me check on Usuta Manabu’s apartment today.”

“I will admit the police weren’t sealing it off very well because this is being treated as a suicide, but there’s still something wrong with walking in so boldly right in front of a police detective! Are you a thief as well as a journalist!?”

“You can’t find the truth if you’re afraid of taking risks. Anyway, who’s that girl?”

“Hi! Hachi TV has hired Bug☆Bust-…”

“That’s a lie, isn’t it? But if the higher ups believe you, I can’t just fire you. Are you the mystery freak Hayabusa-kun mentioned?”

She cut me off and moved on!?

The word “enemy” flashed in the back of my mind, but neither the detective nor the TV station woman seemed to care.

“Don’t worry about her. Now, will you help out your old underclassman and show me that material you mentioned earlier, Atou-san?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Hayabusa-kun, we may no longer be upperclassman and underclassman, but feel free to call me Minori-chan.”

"In other words, you want me to call you an idiot?"

Atou Minori, hm?

Based on the company ID hanging from her neck, she was an assistant producer in charge of the high-level documentaries often seen on commercial satellite broadcasts. It was basically a summer project that adults spent tons of money on while pretending it was all perfectly serious. They generally played things pretty safe, but they would sometimes make waves when they went all out and took an overseas trip to a country no one had ever heard of.

A lot of people wondered what exactly a producer did and what the difference between an assistant director and assistant producer was, but they were usually a misleading title for someone who took care of odd jobs.

Then again, it would be pretty suspicious if she was a full blown producer at her age.

She guided us into Hachi TV.

We were on the way to the video editing section where even the entertainers from the same station never went. Balled up cables and obsolete hard disks filled the rooms and even overflowed into the hallway. It was such a chaotic scene it felt like it had a sign warning anyone who entered to prepare themselves not to take a bath for three days.

"Wait! What are we going to do about this!?"

"Shut up! Those damn critics are completely ignoring what led up to that! Shut it all off!! Do those morons know how much a single ad costs during Golden Week!?"

"Chief, his balls! His balls are in plain view on this video!"

"He let his guard down because he thought we'd cover it all up, didn't he? Leave in a quick glimpse so I can see the look on that damn comedian's face! This is how you create television history!!"

A deluge of terrible angry shouting came from all of the rooms.

Even an elegantly swimming swan was frantically moving its feet below the water.

“That sounds exciting,” I commented.

“Well, it is mid-September. We need to finish up some of the new shows for fall. This is actually quite peaceful compared to when we do the 48-hour TV. We may be competing with the ones that created the concept, but I do have to question why that variety program gets longer every year. I want to tell them that isn’t how to improve it.”

Atou Minori called out to a female assistant director walking down the hall.

“Hey, Mitsu-chan. Did you dig up that tape?”

“Y-yes. You mean this, right? But why do you need something from the cursed storeroom?”

“I have my reasons. This is why we don’t destroy all those tapes.”

“Don’t blame me for whatever happens.”

While Assistant Director Akashi Mitsu-chan bit her thumbnail like a child and walked off, the detective tilted his head.

“The cursed storeroom?”

“That’s what we call the room where we keep all the problem tapes that have been locked away for some reason or other. Honestly, we’re just making documentaries, but if you touch on the wrong genre, you’re not allowed to air it. It feels just like being the one person kept out of a group photo.”

In other words, it was a storeroom filled with the station’s history of losses.

Atou Minori opened a nearby door and led us into a dimly-lit room filled with monitors and editing equipment.

“The digital tape doesn’t use a normal format, so you can only play it on the station’s equipment.”

The rectangular cassette tape was the size of a playing card and it had a few things written in permanent marker on the side: a date from three years ago, Atou Minori’s name as the creator, and “Control Experiment Using the Wheel of Suffering”.

However, the detective focused on something completely different.

"Huh? You use glasses now?"

"These are only for when I'm using the computer. Haven't you heard of blue light?"

What's this? What's this? Are intellectual glasses girls right in the detective's strike zone!?

Come to think of it, he was pretty hot-blooded during Tomoe's case!!

I'd let my guard down because of that wedding ring, but it looks like she is my enemy. My woman's intuition is telling me not to let my guard down!! Grr!!

"Just to be clear, this is nothing fun."

It appeared Atou Minori had no idea what I was thinking as she brushed her hair over one ear and operated the console.

The footage was displayed on one of the monitors.

It showed a white room.

The room had a circle about three meters across drawn in permanent marker or something similar.

The wheel of suffering, hm?

A girl of about fifteen was curled up in the center of the circle.

The girl wore pajamas.

In the footage, she glanced fearfully toward the edge of the circle again and again. It was a lot like she was holding onto a plank floating in the ocean with a shark circling her.

Someone must have been standing out of view of the camera because a calm adult man's voice spoke.

"Tabata-san, please come outside the circle. Outside. It can just be a single step, but please come outside."

"N-no. I-I just can't…"

" 'Those people' are gone, so there is nothing to worry about. Now come outside, Tabata-san."

"I know that!! I know this doesn't make sense…but I can't. I can't leave. I can't go anywhere outside!!"

Some men and women in lab coats stepped into frame. They easily stepped over the drawn-on circle and approached the girl named Tabata.

"Stop… Stop! Don't drag me!!"

"Ghhh!! She just bit me!"

After a struggle, the men and women in lab coats were knocked outside the circle.

Next, a high-pitched bell rang and dark smoke entered from the door in the back of the white room.

"What now?"

"Tabata-san, this is an emergency. There's a fire. This is not a drill."

"I can't leave."

"I see. Well, we're going to evacuate. You please hurry out as well."

"Wait! Wait!! Why are you messing with the camera? Did you really turn it off!? But…but I can't leave. You must know that! I feel dizzy. I can't stop shaking!!"

"Hurry, Tabata-san."

"Then erase the circle! If you wipe off just one spot, I can leave!! Wait! Please don't leave me! I don't want to die! But I still can't leave! I can't leeeeeeeaaaaaaave!!"

The video ended there and the detective spoke with pure gloom in his voice.

"How much of that was a set up?"

"Think of it like a cruel hidden camera show. If we didn't truly scare her, we couldn't film the truth. If we didn't go all the way, the viewers would think it was a joke."

Atou Minori looked completely unconcerned as she said that, so she may have been a professional in one sense.

She pursued the truth in a different way than the detective.

“When you get down to it, it’s the same as a fear of heights or of needles,” she readily concluded. “They have an extreme fear of breaking the rules set by the perpetrator and that fear fills their entire body. Every time they come close to breaking those rules, they find themselves unable to move. Chains and handcuffs aren’t needed to restrain someone. You just need the right kinds of memories.”

Whenever a case of abuse showed up, people always asked why the victim hadn’t consulted anyone sooner.

Or they would ask why the victim had returned to that house everyday despite knowing they would be abused.

But the answer was simple. It wasn’t that they didn’t. It was that they *couldn’t*.

If they disobeyed those established rules in the slightest, something horrible would happen. When someone was yelled at or beaten for spilling a little bit of food or talking back, they had concrete examples of what would happen. That fear would keep them walking along that same path even when they knew it led to a cliff.

And eventually, they would fall off that cliff.

“Hey, hey. If you’re a specialist in this field, I’ve got a question. Can you make a manmade version of this?”

“Nothing this horrible could happen without human intervention.”

It seemed I had phrased my question poorly

I changed my way of thinking and spoke again.

“Normally, the perpetrator’s violence incidentally causes the victim to fall into that state, but I was wondering if it could be ‘installed’ in someone based on a certain theory.”

“Well, in a way, I suppose. In a broad sense, a drill sergeant’s foulmouthed insulting of recruits is a form of psychological abuse. But…” She shrugged. “That probably isn’t perfect.”

“Meaning?”

“It’s easy to cause it, but there’s too much individual variation in how long it lasts. There's a chance it will suddenly vanish one day. You could say people have different aptitudes for it. You might be able to construct a specialized manual for individual people, but it would be tricky to perfectly control hundreds or thousands of people with the same system."

Come to think of it, there are plenty of soldiers who break military regulations and are dishonorably discharged despite going through boot camp.

"Then are you saying it would be impossible to control a certain group using psychological abuse?"

"Even a cult's group brainwashing only works because it's only used on those who accept their invitation either online or around town. In other words, the invitation is a way of preselecting the people to be brainwashed. Controlling every last person of a group truly chosen at random would probably be impossible. …With a normal method anyway."

"So is there a non-normal method?"

"The trick to psychological abuse is how you carve a vivid 'symbol of fear' into the target. As long as you do that, you just have to remind them as if rubbing salt in the wound and you can re restrain as many times as you need. You would need a symbol so powerful that it would cause anyone to fall into fear. That would have to be Satan or Hades or some other mythological lord of demons from *the realm of the occult,* but if you had something like that…"

Without worrying about individual aptitude, you could carve psychological abuse into every last person of a group as if uniformly overwriting their minds at the flip of a switch.

You could create a human controller.

And it would be so absolutely powerful that they truly would die if you told them to.

But…

That would have to be quite a symbol of fear. Atou Minori had used a mythological lord of demons as an example, but it seemed fitting to me. No normal Youkai would work.

Some Youkai could fly and some could transform into anything they wanted.

But this would have to be an extremely unique Youkai that was simply a “vague sense of fear” and could bend the laws of physics.

“Some people suspected a Youkai was involved with the girl in that video. You could say that’s why I pursued the story.”

“What?” asked the detective.

Atou Minori gave a bitter addition to her statement and the detective looked even more displeased than before when he heard it.

“I was never able to prove it, but it was rumored to be an *Aburatori. That’s a name we can’t exactly ignore, isn’t it*?”

After we left Hachi TV, we entered a nearby shopping mall for a strategy meeting.

They must have had some kind of filming today or were simply there for fun because the Hierophant and the Moon were sitting at another seat while disguised with glasses and hats. They were easily distinguishable by viewing one as the big one and the other as the little one. Oh, and that’s referring to their breasts.

“Let’s set aside how much the Youkai called an Aburatori is involved in this.”

I got the uncertain information out of the way first and then got into the real issue at hand.

“There are two types of psychological abuse in this case. The first is with Tarot Girls 22. Most likely, the reason they don’t cause any trouble with smoking, boyfriends, or anything else is because they’re bound by invisible chains.”

“Is that really possible? Psychological abuse may be a hard-to-spot method of control that doesn’t use any noticeable violence or restraints, but the psychological state is a lot like being abused or imprisoned for long periods of time. If they’re under that kind of pressure day in and day out…”

“Yeah, they probably won’t last if it goes on for years. But idols have short lifespans. No one questions it if they say they're quitting because they're getting older. And there are 78 members of Tarot Girls 22. The organization can continue as long as the few who reach their limit are replaced. Also, no one pays any attention to an idol after they quit. A few wrinkles and everyone loses interest."

"So the idea that they're expendable is built into the system?" groaned the detective.

The system certainly had its problems, but I wasn't so sure the current laws could punish them for it.

On the surface, they were only placing tape on the practice room floor to create a completely open yet "sealed" room.

"So is the other one Usuta Manabu? Did he end up with psychological abuse because of all the debt collectors stopping by?"

"C'mon, detective, did you forget? Because he was in so much debt, Usuta worked for them by searching for a scandal related to Tarot Girls 22."

"Are you saying it wasn't incidental? So that was 'installed' in him to attack Tarot Girls 22? He was turned into an expendable underling of the black market moneylenders?"

"From the beginning, the multiple black-market moneylenders he dealt with…or rather, the people above them had a system to keep their men in line using psychological abuse."

I smiled and mixed my iced coffee with the straw.

"It's still a mystery why they were after Tarot Girls 22, but Usuta Manabu had been brought under control of psychological abuse using System A and he began acting oddly once he came into contact with Tarot Girls 22 which was being controlled by System B. It's like two pieces of software came into conflict."

In other words, this case seemed to involve two Packages with similar effects: System A that black market moneylenders used to restrain those indebted to them and System B that prevented any scandals in an idol group.

When the two Packages controlled by different people came into conflict, it accidentally caused Usuta Manabu's suicide or murder.

“That means…”

“This is a case of the black market moneylenders interfering with Tarot Girls 22 who were stable at least for the moment. Usuta failed, but the moneylender might not give up. What if they use more of their blacklisted customers to attack Tarot Girls 22?”

“Then there will be more suicides in the future. No, the type of panic it causes may not be the same in everyone. Usuta burnt himself to death, but it’s possible it was a failed murder. And someone in an extreme state of mind might try to harm the people around him.”

“In that case, we might need to speak with the moneylenders…or rather, the group that controls them.”

“The group that controls multiple black market moneylenders.”

The detective muttered those words and brought a hand to his forehead.

That was what lurked in the depths of the darkness. This felt like the hidden “other half” of this case.

“*A large criminal organization.*”

Part 8 (3rd person)

At eleven at night, two police detectives wearing cheap suits sat next to each other in a Shinbashi bar.

One was Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department's Investigation Department 1.

The other was Detective Sotobori Gaku of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department's Organized Crime Division.

While sitting in the stools, they both made their separate orders.

"A martini. Shaken, not stirred."

"I'll have a frozen daiquiri."

Sotobori, who was often called a tank, snapped his fingers and made fun of the other detective.

"Do you think you're James Bond or something?"

"Shut up, Hemingway."

Already annoyed, Uchimaku took a sip from the cocktail glass.

Sotobori gave a grin that made him look as much like a thug as the people he pursued.

"Anyway, it's never a good sign when a murder case specialist asks me for help. Did some kind of 'organization' dump a corpse in the sea or on a mountain?"

"That's what I want to know. You know all about those *large criminal organizations*, right? Then you know about the Comfort Association, don't you?"

"The Comfort Association, huh? That's the Japanese branch of one of the top four networks, so you're getting into some dangerous territory here."

Despite his words, his tone was carefree.

Sotobori specialized in organized crime like this, so bringing in guns or explosives was not enough to surprise him.

"It began in the confusion at the end of the war. They're a bodyguard group that was created in that chaotic time on the pretense of supplying weapons and soldiers to protect the weak. In modern terms, they were an arms dealer and PMC rolled into one. At first, they worked to be the allies of women and children."

"And how did that end up 'expanding'?"

Sotobori mixed up his drink that was a lot like shaved ice made from alcohol.

"Changes always come from outside stimuli. It started as a conflict with another organization that was growing in the narcotics business. To gain more weaponry and personnel, they began doing more dirty work. The Comfort Association ultimately won that conflict, but by that time, not even a shred of their original ideals remained."

He told the story like he was reminiscing to a child.

"And after that, they took the standard course. Once they had 'expanded' to the entire country, stricter laws prevented them from running their business any longer. Some of them were angry enough to join with overseas gangs and mafias and they built up an international criminal network. And thus a *large criminal organization* was born. Japan's traditions don't matter to them at all. They build up their strength by smuggling in tons of assault rifles and grenades. If they begin a real firefight, it'll turn the city into a warzone."

"But I thought the Comfort Association was a part of the lowest ranked of the world's top four networks?"

"Where did you see that? On some suspicious online encyclopedia that anyone could've written? It's true the higher ups of the Comfort Association may not have the most personnel, weaponry, or funding, but there are also some dangerous rumors. For example, some say they're the world's first civilian organization with nuclear weapons."

"Nuclear…weapons?"

"They supposedly stole a MIRV warhead from an abandoned Soviet facility, dismantled it, and recovered a few of the small nukes clustered inside. It's also come to light that they've been threatening an overseas civilian spaceflight company. Put those facts together, and they might have the capability for a nuclear ballistic missile attack. Can you really call that the lowest ranked? The worst part is, you can. These networks gather such dreadful people that even with those doubts, they still rank the lowest."

Uchimaku Hayabusa brought a hand to his forehead.

This was not at all the world of swords and modified firearms he had been imagining.

"You can take on the Comfort Association if you want, but call me when you do. There's a type of etiquette for dealing with this kind of criminal organization. If you don't know how it works, even a police officer will end up dumped in the sea or on a mountain. A dead cop is a big deal, but a missing one doesn't stand out much."

"I understand that."

"Do you really? You remind me of the middle-aged detective that lived in my neighborhood when I was a kid. He tried to make his way through this business with his own naïve reasoning. One day, he tried to save a kid and ended up being killed by that kid. The kid was a hitman. Believe it or not, the kid was only about ten. I told the police, but they refused to believe me to a disturbing degree. I'm a little embarrassed to admit it, but that's what led me to become a detective."

"I said I understand."

Uchimaku waved a hand and Sotobori downed the rest of his sherbet-style alcohol.

Uchimaku glanced over at him while asking another question.

"Oh, right. You've heard of the idol group Tarot Girls 22, right? Does it make any sense businesswise for a *large criminal organization* to target entertainers like that?"

"Not a bit," replied Sotobori Gaku without a moment's delay. "Whether you're threatening them or luring them, the top of the industry stands out too much. How many paparazzi do you think are following them around everywhere? It'd be impossible to contact them in secret. And national idols who have a solid position that earns them tons of money won't need to ask villains for help. If anyone, they'd go after the idols in fifth or sixth place. They wouldn't have all that much money, there wouldn't be too much focus on them, and the idols themselves would be desperate for more. *They'd* be the perfect targets."

"I see."

Then what circumstances had Tarot Girls 22 found themselves in? He thought for a bit, but could not find an answer.

Afterwards, they mocked each other's drink choices while drinking a few more cocktails.

"Samurai rock? Ga ha ha! Uchimaku-chan, do you think you're the last samurai or something!?"

"Shut up! And stop troubling the bartending by ordering fruit punch!!"

They also grabbed at each other's ties in a fight over the cured ham one of them had ordered, but then they began getting along a little better.

Five steps after he left the bar, Uchimaku heard a voice from behind him.

"Detectiiiive!"

"Oh, god!! Where did you latch onto me, mystery freak? Don't tell me a minor like you was hiding in that bar!"

"You're a pain to deal with when you're drunk, but you're also cuter when drunk. Anyway, it looks like you're still sober enough to talk, so let's have a strategy meeting."

"A strategy meeting?"

"Right. We're only going to get one shot at this *large criminal organization*, so we have to make sure it counts. It would be best to prepare as much as possible beforehand. You probably don't even know what to ask if you charged into their office, right?'

"Sotobori said they'd have no reason to get involved with Tarot Girls 22."

The drunk did not realize how loose his lips had gotten.

He would normally have insisted this was confidential investigation material.

"In other words, something out of the ordinary is going on with this *large criminal organization*. They have a reason that requires they get involved with Tarot Girls 22 even if it isn't the safest thing."

"Usuta Manabu committed suicide because they used their black list of indebted people to search for scandals on those idols, right? But he felt so cornered that he tried to make his own shocking scandal, whether it was attempted murder or his own suicide. Is there any doubt here? The *large criminal organization* was simply after a scandal, weren't they?"

"When investigating a case, there are two types of people with important information."

Enbi lightly waved her index finger.

"The perpetrators and the victims."

To make things more difficult, this case was centered on a certain Package. Different people had been using different versions of the Package and the problem had grown more complex when the two interfered with each other.

That meant they could not see the whole picture without attacking on both fronts.

Uchimaku was trying to work toward the *large criminal organization* where a single mistake could mean his life. It made him feel on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Who had done what?

If he did not know that, he could easily find misleading evidence at some important point.

"I guess I have to check with the Tarot Girls 22 first."

"Yes, you need to fill in the holes there so your preparations are complete when you confront the *large criminal organization*. You might find something unthinkable lurking there."

Part 9

The following morning, I snuck into the Tarot Girls 22 building in Shinbashi. As expected, the detective showed up.

“Why are you here?”

“Do I really have to spell it out? It’s because I love you.”

The Devil, a girl obsessed with taking memos, must have liked rumors because I saw her ears twitching with an innocent look on her face, but the detective only brought a hand to his forehead.

Yes! This issue is already settled, so spread it around some more!

While holding a quick conversation, we boarded the elevator. The elevators were divided between floors one through ten and floors eleven through twenty, but this was the latter system.

“This is so much easier with you around, detective. I couldn’t get into these top floors even when using the Bug Busters name.”

“You really don’t play fair. If you keep repeating the same thing until I give in, it makes me feel like I’m the one in the wrong.”

Once we arrived at the president’s office on the top floor, the reception secretary led us into a large room. There we found the unsociable manager named Itano Ryou.

The detective looked surprised.

“Huh? Um, I asked to speak with the president.”

“Detective, she is the president. She’s the type that likes to stand on the front lines.”

This was a company that had grown enough to own an entire coastal building in the city center while only having the one idol group. It wasn’t large enough to need to step back to see the big picture.

Itano, who wore a suit, was glaring at us.

“Most troublesome meetings can be dealt with using a smartphone and camera and working on the scene fits me better. There are a few other managers, but I supervise all of them."

"I-I see."

"More importantly, who is that girl? I had only heard she was volunteering to eliminate bugs."

Before the detective could say anything unfortunate, I waved around an unnecessarily bulky radio.

"Well, you wouldn't let me investigate the upper floors, which is dangerous. I don't have time to search now, but I can send out a jamming signal. Now, then. Have a nice chat☆"

Itano Ryou sighed and sat on the desk rather than the luxurious leather chair.

She slowly crossed her legs.

It looked like a high pressure attitude, but I had an inkling it was actually a defensive thing.

"What do you want to know?"

"There are just a few things I want to check about the suicide of Usuta Manabu from your sound staff."

"We had nothing to do with that. He clearly committed suicide and he was not even a full member of our-…"

"Three years ago, Tabata Rin, Control Experiment Using the Wheel of Suffering."

Oh, well done, detective.

Just after she had thought she had cleared all the questions, he went straight for the heart of the issue.

Itano Ryou stopped breathing for a moment and crossed her arms.

"You know what that is, don't you?"

"Not a clue."

"You do. The way you crossed your arms after being asked was meant as a defensive posture. The way you subconsciously tightened your lips is dead giveaway too. If that isn't enough for you, how about I set up a proper polygraph?"

Everything he was saying was accurate, but none of it really mattered here.

It was all an act to draw out some further sign from the president who thought she had been found out.

"Where did you hear about that?"

"It is a device that artificially embeds psychological abuse using the power of the Youkai called an Aburatori."

"That was never aired. More importantly, you in the police can't do anything just because I copied it. I am not using any physical abuse and I believe there is no law concerning psychological abuse."

"But putting that unnecessary pressure on the idols nonstop will wear down their psyches in only a few years. Smoking? Boyfriends? Is avoiding scandals really that important? Your method destroys people and throws them out when you're done."

"Do you have any idea how short the lifespan of an idol is?"

"Did you think that meant you could use them up and no one would notice?"

"The girls I am left with have their entire lives judged using just those few years. Do you get what that means?"

Itano Ryou glared at us with some pressure oozing our way.

"An idol that doesn't sell meets a sad fate. They have to return to a normal life, but they can't. Once you've lived this bright life, there is no going back. And if they try to remain in this world of luxury without making the money they need, their financial situation will naturally crumble. These few years are what decide the next seventy or eighty years of their lives! Doing whatever is necessary to help them succeed is the kind thing to do!!"

The detective and Itano Ryou glared at each other for a while.

However, this was not what we actually wanted to hear.

We were enraging her so that she would admit to a certain truth.

"In other words, this 'setup' really is based on the Wheel of Suffering method from three years ago. It hasn't been proven, but if that truly had an Aburatori involved, it would be a Package to control humans. You controlled the Tarot Girls 22 with the same method that perverted criminals use to bind their victims. Is that it?"

The documentary had not been aired.

There were no laws governing purely psychological abuse.

Those were good enough excuses if you only needed to find fault.

"The Aburatori is a Youkai that attacks children. It slips into Tohoku villages while dressed as a farmer, abducts the children, stabs them with metal skewers, cooks them over a fire, and takes their oil. But the most frightening aspect is its lack of any direct characteristics."

Itano spat out her response.

"No one has ever seen it. And yet rumors will spread of people having seen it in one village the day before, in another the day before that, and so on. It grows to an unstoppable group hysteria of the sort you might see in a newspaper. Needless to say, that will naturally develop into a witch hunt. *It is a Youkai that spreads fear without even showing itself.* That is the true form of the Aburatori."

"Meaning?"

"What you need is information and an unseen enemy. In my case, I used the numbers of the hit charts."

"The numbers?"

"The exact numbers don't matter. If your ranking drops, you'll naturally fear rivals. Even if you maintain the #1 position, you will feel pursued by your own past records. That is how this Package automatically brings an unseen enemy to mind whenever they see the numbers. No matter the result, they feel equally cornered. Once you create a system like that, they are unable to head down any unnecessary side roads."

Whew.

It sounds simple enough, but the actual pressure has to be something *else.*

It was like forever taking entrance exam after entrance exam where any imperfection would negate all the past work and dropping below the passing line just once would end it all immediately. What would happen to a human mind if that continued for months and even years?

The thread of their tension would be stretched to pieces.

“But there was no obvious sign of a Package anywhere.”

“It was assembled to remain in a state of ‘not being there’. For example, *placing tape on the floor and removing it to leave a slight trace of something having been there.* If they can see the size and shape of their enemy, their fear is limited by that. It’s being unable to see it and unable to know the truth about it that makes it so frightening. Just like no specific person in the villages the Aburatori supposedly showed up in would say they had seen it.”

The detective fell silent for a while.

He seemed unsure how to continue on from there.

“Your Package to control the idols has come into conflict with a different system used by…a *large criminal organization*. That is what caused that suicide. An explosion of pressure led him to take his own life. Any ideas about why that happened?”

“None.”

“If this was a clash between similar psychological abuse systems, it would affect more than just the throwaway soldiers made from indebted people. There is a danger of it affecting the Tarot Girls 22 members as well!!”

That was precisely when an electronic tone played from the internal phone line.

Perhaps out of habit, Itano Ryou hit the speakerphone button but immediately reached for the receiver instead. However, it was too late.

“Maezono the Tower and Uosawa the Temperance have started fighting! P-please just get down here! Should we call an ambulance!?”

Itano clicked her tongue with the receiver off the hook and the detective shouted at her.

“This is no time to be hiding this!! Doesn’t stopping it come first!?”

“Detective, did you see the internal line display? It was the photo studio on the ninth floor.”

He practically tackled open the door to the president’s office, ran past the surprised secretary, and rapidly tapped the elevator button. He soon clicked his tongue and ran to the stairs instead.

I followed him, but I could not keep up. I obediently waited for the elevator and got off at the eleventh floor as that was as low as that one went.

When the door opened, I could hear hurried footsteps disappearing down below.

He sure is amazing.

I followed him down the last two flights of the emergency staircase and arrived at the ninth floor.

The photos studio was the size of your average office floor and the walls, floor, and ceiling were all covered in white cloth. Despite its name, its equipment looked like what you would find in an apartment or multi-tenant building.

The adults holding expensive-looking cameras and reflector boards had their backs to the wall as if to show they were uninvolved with what was happening.

When they saw me enter, they seemed to finally realize there was an exit. No one was guiding them, but they all rushed out into the elevator hall.

“Are you okay, detective!?”

“I went too far!!”

That strange answer made me frown and look to the center of the room. A high school girl with short blonde hair dizzily lay face up on the floor. Another girl with a large ribbon around her head had fallen to her butt. I was also curious about the fountain pen on the floor.

Did he punch one of them and then the other was so shocked she forgot all about her anger and sat down on the floor?

"You sure made this exciting."

"That's how pressing a situation it was. And I wanted to avoid having to handcuff them."

As he spoke, he held a handkerchief against one hand.

Ahh, ahh. He got hurt protecting someone, didn't he? Did he use himself as a shield so he wouldn't have to file a damage report?"

"U-um…"

I heard a quiet voice and found Anemura Kaede-chan the Empress standing pale-faced by the wall. She stood out more now that the adults had left.

"Unlike the photo staff that wasn't doing anything, she tried to stop the fight between the Tower and Temperance. Are you okay, Anemura-san!?"

Silly detective.

That means she's the girl you protected. She isn't trembling because of the violence she saw. It's because you were injured.

"They started talking about the solo singles we'll be putting out soon," said the Empress with her teeth chattering and while looking the detective in the eye. "One of them said the first single would be a test and only those that sold would get a second single. …Why do they have to twist things around like that? No one said that, but whenever we start talking about numbers…we…!!"

"Anemura-san."

It may have seemed terrible, but the detective and I knew the truth. This was an unease and fear intentionally planted inside them to effectively control the group.

"We're all on the same team! We're all part of Tarot Girls 22 and this group is all part of the Major Arcana!! And yet…this happens. Is something wrong with us? …It's just that none of this is any fun!! We're always pursued by some number or another and we smile to make sure our rank doesn't drop even a single place. This…this isn't what I wanted to do!!"

"Anemura-san!!"

The detective shouted right in her face to snap her out of it.

She shifted her focus outward as if she had been struck with a wall of noise.

"I don't know what got you into this and you don't have to tell me. But think of that thing. It doesn't have to be anything noble. It can be that you wanted to be on TV, that you wanted to be popular, or that you wanted money. But I doubt you had run into any actual numbers before entering the business. Right!?"

"Eh? Um…"

"In other words, those numbers aren't what drive you. You've just been trapped in a deception and lost sight of your true reasons. There's no reason to fear this nonexistent 'monster'. Right!?"

"I can't do that… Not anymore."

With a crumbling smile, Anemura Kaede-chan slowly shook her head.

"We know that 'monster' now. Once it starts chasing you, you can't go back."

"Yes, you can. The pure power that drove you in the beginning has to be the strongest thing of all. At the very least, it won't be defeated by some deception. The start is the scariest with everything, but you came knocking at this industry's door even if you had to push your way in. You must possess something powerful enough to let you do that!!"

Tch.

I wanted to hit him in the back with a jealousy kick, but I decided to remain silent for the moment.

"What is going on?"

Finally, President/Manager Itano entered the photo studio. Regardless of what she had done, she was a skilled manager. She had sharp eyes, so she immediately spotted the handkerchief covering one of the detective's hands. In a way, that was a weakness.

Without it, she might have found some reason or another to throw us out.

“I don’t know what conditions are causing the conflict,” said the detective. “That means we have no way of stopping it at the moment. The system meant to prevent any scandals now holds the risk of making your idols kill or harm themselves or others.”

“…”

“Please end the human control Package using an Aburatori! You want to avoid any of your people becoming victims or attackers, don’t you!? While under the direct influence of the Youkai’s power, these girls can’t use normal stress coping mechanisms to avoid an ‘explosion’. There’s no predicting when the next one will burst!! Are you fine with that!?”

“I will monitor the signs that they are reaching their limit and remove any of them that I deem dangerous. Fortunately, Tarot Girls 22 frequently rearrange what members take part in shows and concerts, so no one will mind if a few of them do not appear.”

“The signs? Do you think they’re going to start killing small animals around their neighborhood or setting fires in empty houses or trash dumps? And you think you can always catch these 100% of the time before anything more significant happens?”

“When Anemura the Empress speaks with people, she frequently and repeatedly crosses her arms. That is the kind of defensive pose that magicians and fortune tellers use in a cold reading. Uosawa the Temperance was the one to cause this commotion and I had been worried about her because she had recently lost her filter on what she posted on the SNS that uses her real name. If I keep up my detailed observations and thorough care, I can overcome this.”

“What about the other one that caused this bit of trouble? What about Maezono-san the Tower? Had you seen the signs in her?”

“…”

“You also overlooked Usuta Manabu’s signs and we all know what that led to. Monitoring even a single person isn’t easy and you think you can constantly check a group of 78? With all this going on!? Not to mention that none of your staff is involved in their school lives! You have to know there are holes in your management system!!”

Itano fell silent for a while.

Despite being one of those involved, Anemura Kaede-chan looked confused because she did not know the whole situation.

Finally, that female president let out a heavy sigh.

“I can’t.”

“You…!!”

“I said I can’t. Not that I wouldn’t if I could. I am not rejecting a request from the police and there is no crime you can charge me with.”

The detective snapped his fingers.

“Did you hear that, mystery freak?”

“Eh? Well, yes.”

“Anemura-san, you’re a witness too. Don’t forget what Itano-san just said.

“What are you trying to say I said?”

The female president latched onto this before the Empress idol could say anything.

The detective replied with a cruel smile on his lips.

“You made an official statement that you want to help but can’t. In other words, if we find a way to eliminate that Package, you will work to help us. That would leave you with no reason to get in our way. Isn’t that right?”

“…”

Itano Ryou remained silent for a moment but finally spoke.

“If there is a way. But once you test it out, you’ll see that there is no way to remove this Aburatori human control Package.”

The main point of this Package was to create a system that produced an unseen enemy by forcing psychological abuse on anyone regardless of their psychological aptitude.

She had encoded that by…

“Detective, there’s one example of those ‘remnants’ on the dance floor on the fifth floor. Four L-shapes made from tape create a square area that acts as an imaginary cage. However, the tape has been removed to leave only the sticky remnants.”

“Look above you, mystery freak. There’s a small hole in the ceiling. It looks like the remnants of a metal hook or something similar stabbed into the ceiling. It’s like what you would use to hang someone from the ceiling after tying them up. There are also extension cables bundled up in the corner of the room.”

But there was nothing there in reality.

This entire building contained nothing but the “remnants”.

Those remnants showed something that did not actually exist. They were the pieces giving form to the Aburatori Package. When the actual objects had been removed, those pieces would never vanish no matter how much you tried to erase those remnants.

After all, it was normal for the objects to not be there.

Just as some depressing past could not be erased, the already-removed objects could not be destroyed no matter what one did. To erase a truth that once was, you would need a time machine.

In that case, no one could destroy them.

This Package had absolute strength as it could not be destroyed even if you understood everything about it.

However…

“Detective, do you know what you need?”

“Duct tape, a metal hook, and a few other things. Just the standard equipment for some home improvement.”

“What?” asked President Itano.

He threw his words back at her.

“The objects are meant to be missing. The remnants that make you think they were once there are the pieces the Package is made from. In that case, we just have to destroy that equilibrium. Destruction is not the only way to erase those remnants.”

“You don’t mean…”

“We just have to put more duct tape over the floor were the previous tape was removed. If this ceiling used to have a hook stabbing into it, we just have to stab a metal hook into it again. If we return everything to how it was before the remnants were created, we can erase those remnants. We’ll bring out the objects that existed in the past and then destroy them ourselves. That will destroy your Package and prevent it from drawing in the power and traits of the Aburatori!!”

The color of Itano Ryou’s face changed before my eyes, but it was too late.

“You can’t stop us from doing this. After all, you yourself said you were willing to help but couldn’t!!”

No visible change occurred.

There was nothing different about her complexion.

But…

“Huh?

Anemura Kaede-chan the Empress looked blankly down at her hands. Not even she seemed to know what had happened to her. There was of course no way for those of us on the outside to understand.

“Detective, do you think this settles everything?”

“I wish it was that easy, but the mystery surrounding the *large criminal organization* remains. We may have stopped the Package on the Tarot Girls 22 side, but if anyone on the *large criminal organization* side has already had their file corrupted due to the conflict between systems, someone might lose control like Usuta Manabu did.”

Yeah, we have to actually check on all that, don't we?

We once more faced President Itano Ryou.

Seeing her Package destroyed may have felt like watching her kingdom crumble before her. She had a distant look in her eyes as the detective spoke to her.

"Will you help us? Do you have any ideas about this *large criminal organization*? Why are they sending throwaway soldiers to search for something concerning Tarot Girls 22? I doubt they just want your everyday scandal."

"It was while working with Hachi TV on a project that I originally learned about the Wheel of Suffering method that uses the Aburatori. To bring some focus to a boring documentary, they wanted to use one of our girls as an announcer."

"And?"

"At the time, our office did receive a few threatening emails telling us not to make the documentary. We looked into it and found it was an address used by someone hired by a dating site to pretend to be a girl and email men to attract them to the site. It was also connected to a *large criminal organization*. We continued working on the show, but since it was never aired, there may have been some pressure from another direction," she said. "In other words, the incident used in the documentary may have been a *large criminal organization*'s experiment in controlling people so they could use indebted people as their pawns. If so, it means our control systems use the exact same individual Youkai. It makes sense why that would cause the systems to clash."

Part 10 (3rd person)

Uchimaku Hayabusa asked Detective Sotobori Gaku, a specialist in organized crime, how to deal with the *large criminal organization* and he was readily told to meet up the following day. He did not know the details, but it seemed that was the perfect timing.

The next morning, Uchimaku travelled to Shinjuku via train. On the way, he met up with Sotobori and walked down a road that was crowded even on a weekday.

“How are we going to get in to speak with them?”

“We just need a justification.”

They were in an area of Kabukichou crammed full of small multi-tenant buildings. A black luxury car was parked there as if ignoring the width of the road. Naturally, no one paid any attention to it.

Sotobori smiled and waved as he approached it.

“Hi there. It’s the police.”

“What do you want? We aren’t looking for anything obvious like protection money.”

A young man with short hair stepped forward. He seemed to be a driver, a bodyguard, or both.

Sotobori ignored him and tried to peer inside the car.

“Is there someone important in here? This is a G550 class, isn’t it? These cost 20 million yen.”

“Get your hand off the door! This is no different from a searching a home. Bring a warrant first!!”

“By the way, did you know this is a no parking zone?”

“Then…”

“*You’ve left yourself wide open, you goddamn idiot.*”

Sotobori Gaku’s smile never wavered as he kicked the luxury car with enough force to bend the bumper.

"You piece of-…! What the hell do you think you're- Vggah!!!??"

The young man tried to grab at him, so Sotobori grabbed his neck with the opposite arm.

And he lifted him up.

"Here's a little lesson, you thug. If you park on a downward slope, step out to pick something up at a shop, didn't put on the hand brake quite enough, and the car rolls down and hits someone, it's your responsibility."

"Gh…oh?"

"This is a no parking zone and your parked car just injured my leg. That's 100% your responsibility. Sounds like a case the police should get involved in, doesn't it!?"

With that said, Sotobori tossed the young man onto the hood of the car. The man's butt broke off the emblem that symbolized the luxury car and he looked as upset as a child on the verge of tears.

The tinted glass on the back door then slowly lowered.

A middle-aged man inside had a troubled frown on his face.

"How about you stop teasing him? He only joined us last month, so he doesn't know how to treat people yet."

"You got anything dangerous in there?"

"Avoiding anything that can be traced is the key to a long life. Instead of pointlessly threatening you, that fool should have just let you through."

The car door opened and Sotobori Gaku and Uchimaku Hayabusa climbed inside. Unlike a normal car, the seats were situated around the perimeter of the back area which was completely separated from the driver's seat by glass.

Sotobori did not hesitate to pull out a handgun and tap the muzzle on the glass divider near the driver's head.

"If this thing moves a single millimeter, I'll blow his brains out for abducting us. Make sure he knows that."

"He is well acquainted with our rules. Now, what would you like to discuss?”

“Usuta Manabu,” said Uchimaku. “The sound staff member who burned himself to death. He was heavily in debt due to your ‘affiliates’. You had ordered him to investigate Tarot Girls 22. …But you weren’t actually after a scandal, were you? I’ve also heard the top of the industry stands out too much for people in your business.”

“And?”

“The Wheel of Suffering. That’s a human control Package that uses the Youkai called an Aburatori. You were investigating that so you could crush it.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“This is no time to be searching out how much I know.” Uchimaku let out a gentle breath. “Tarot Girls 22 was using the Wheel of Suffering method to control the idols, but what about you? Was it to control the poor customers who were hopelessly in debt? No. If that’s all you wanted, you wouldn’t need a Package. You could’ve just used their debt. …So where were you using the Wheel of Suffering method?”

“That one’s not too hard to figure out,” said Sotobori with a grin. “To fight the new systems put in place to eliminate organized crime, you built up an international network connected to gangs and mafias from countries around the world. China, Columbia, Italy, Africa, Eastern Europe… Your forces are spread out over a vast area to prevent any one nation’s police from reaching you, but that makes it easy for different parts of the same giant organization to come into conflict. You’ve gathered together different countries and cultures from around the world, so you never know when or why some kind of trouble will break out.”

“And so you used a human control package to gather together your criminal organization under a unified set of rules.”

Uchimaku slowly presented that card while convinced of their victory.

And he was naturally watching his opponent’s face as he did so.

“But did you really have the foreign members’ consent in this? Did they understand you were using a Package that includes a Youkai, a concept that can’t be translated into any other language? If the Japanese Comfort Association started it without telling them anything, that would be a problem. If they viewed it as a coup d’etat to take full control, it would trigger that internal conflict you fear so much.”

“…”

The middle-aged man fell silent.

He did not confirm or deny the accusation, so Uchimaku continued speaking.

“In that case, Tarot Girls 22 was a thorn in your side. You wanted to keep things as hidden as possible, but any contact between the idols and members of your *large criminal organization* would cause conflict and send your Package out of control. If it had been a normal person, you could have just killed them and buried them in the mountains, but an idol group at the top of the industry stood out too much. That’s why you had someone investigate Tarot Girls 22, no matter how dangerous it was. You wanted to destroy the idols’ human control Package and then slip back into hiding.”

Tarot Girls 22’s human control Package had been destroyed, but there was no guarantee its effects would fully vanish right away. It could take days or even weeks. As long as the *large criminal organization*’s Package was still running with those negative effects remaining, there was still a risk of something unpredictable happening.

“Whatever the case, it looks like we don’t have much time.” Sotobori shrugged. “If this comes to light, your Japanese branch is the one that will suffer. You don’t want to experience the varied torture and execution methods the international community has to offer, do you? And we would prefer for our peaceful country to not end up at war. Public servants don’t get a pay bonus for enemies defeated and those foreign groups tend to use rocket launchers and armored trucks. We also don’t want any civilian victims.”

“Are you asking me to cooperate?”

“End your Package right this instant. Also, hand over a list of the blacklisted debtors who may have come into contact with Tarot Girls 22. They’re having a concert at the Toyosu Outdoor Concert Hall soon and it’s all over for you if any of them die or go crazy in the middle of that, right?”

The middle-aged man gave a heavy sigh and tossed a clipboard to Uchimaku.

As soon as the two detectives left the luxury vehicle, someone spoke.

“That was a quick decision.”

This new voice seemed to slip into the vehicle. A slender young man was sitting inside. Not only had the detectives not noticed he had been sitting there the entire time, but the middle-aged man who had known he was there had completely forgotten until just now.

He was a fortuneteller hired by the Comfort Association and he was the one who had actually put together this Package.

The middle-aged man spoke with clear annoyance in his voice.

“Your method would never have settled this. The members were automatically infected by the Package from the top levels down, so there was still a danger of a conflict of some sort. There was never a safe way of infiltrating Tarot Girls 22.”

“I truly apologize.”

“No, I was wrong to rely on you for this. And we still need a specialized advisor to revise the Aburatori Package. I look forward to working with you in the future, master.”

Part 11

“Any success, detective?”

“You idiot! Why are you standing around this dangerous shopping district wearing not much more than a swimsuit!? Well, I can get after you for that later. Hey, Sotobori. Copy this and send it out to everyone! We need to call all these people and check their residences!!”

The detective was shouting something while photographing a number of documents with his cell phone camera. It looked like he had made some progress inside that luxury car.

I peered over and pointed at something.

“Look, detective. This list has that AD we saw at Hachi TV. It’s Akashi Mitsu-chan.”

“What!? But this is a list of people heavily in debt to the consumer moneylenders involved with that *large criminal organization*!”

“Hah hah hah.”

The guy who looked like he was wearing armor made of muscles spoke up from the side.

“Did the TV industry look that nice to you, Uchimaku-chan? It brings in a lot of money to the top earners, but it isn’t easy reaching that point. Those who never make it anywhere will never earn more than your average part-timer. And since they have to go along with the extravagant industry rules and events, it isn’t uncommon for them to make use of loan sharks.”

“Then it’s possible she was being used by them. And due to the conflict between Packages, the puppeteer’s strings will have snapped.”

“Akashi Mitsu. She would bite her thumbnail when we spoke, wouldn’t she?”

“Infantile regression is a type of defense mechanism. It’s a lot like how Anemura Kaede-chan the Empress would cross her arms when she felt awkward, so that AD might have been trying to force down a similar sort of pressure.”

“You mean the competition between Packages was affecting her? Dammit!!”

The detective frantically pulled out his phone and called the number on the list.

But after about ten seconds he clicked his tongue.

“She isn’t answering!!”

“Detective, for three days starting today, Tarot Girls 22 is having concerts at the Toyosu Outdoor Concert Hall. Hachi TV is supporting them, so she must be at the TV station! What is she in charge of and what’s her schedule!?”

“How am I supposed to know!? …No, wait.”

He began calling another number.

I glanced at the screen and saw the name Atou Minori.

“You want to know where Mitsu-chan is?” said the voice over the phone. “Hold up. Have you started going after younger girls now? You’re going to make me sad. I feel like I’ve been thrown out to die.”

“What? I already know you’re an idiot, so please understand that this is an emergency!!”

“She should have been at the concert hall in Toyosu since this morning. She’s part of the filming team, but she’s more or less a security guard meant to guide the audience.”

After ending the call, he waved down a taxi.

The other detective who looked like the captain of a judo team was taken aback.

“What am I supposed to do!?”

“Check the residences on the blacklist. Akashi Mitsu is the most suspicious, but there might be others who could be set off at the same time. Check out all the other possibilities!!”

I used the confusion to slip into the back seat of the taxi.

"What are you doing, mystery freak!?"

"If you don't scoot over, I'll sit on your lap."

The taxi started on the way to the outdoor concert hall.

Now, then. Now, then.

"That AD can get in and out of the concert hall more easily than anyone else. Will we actually make it in time?"

"If something happened, the news would reach the taxi's radio. Also, if a member of Tarot Girls 22 is killed like this, gangs and mafias from all over might start a war inside Japan."

Part 12

The result was completely anticlimactic.

The detective pulled out his police badge and forced his way into the staff entrance, but the facility was completely carefree. We found nothing remotely resembling an incident. A temp worker glared at him while clearing suspecting he was abusing his authority to get a signature.

There was a concert every morning, noon, and night and they were currently on a break.

"Where is Akashi Mitsu?" asked the detective while looking all around in a corridor. "Akashi Mitsu, an AD from Hachi TV, should be here. Does anyone know where she is!?"

The sweaty staff members who had towels around their necks all shook their heads.

However, they did not simply mean they had not seen her.

"We haven't heard anything from her. She normally never misses a day, so she must've been really unlucky to oversleep on the morning of such a major event."

"…"

It was not that everything was fine. It was because everything wasn't fine that Akashi Mitsu-chan wasn't here.

The difficult part of this case was how we could not predict how the conflict between human control Packages would show itself. The person might try to kill Tarot Girls 22 or they might secretly commit suicide. In the latter case, it was possible she was no longer alive.

At that point, the detective received an unexpected phone call.

It was from the muscular detective we had parted ways with earlier.

"This has gotten dangerous, Uchimaku. You need to get out of there right away!!"

"What?"

"I checked Akashi Mitsu's apartment. It was empty, but I found her on the surveillance cameras of the nearby stores. She stole a tanker truck refueling at a nearby gas station!! It was full of the waste liquid used in gilding. In other words, a high concentration of cyanide. If she even gets into an accident and the truck catches on fire, it'll spread a deadly gas over the entire area!! Smoke that will kill anyone who inhales even a little will cover several hundred meters!!"

"Seriously? Do you know where she's headed!?"

"The truck's GPS is still active and she's headed straight for the Toyosu Outdoor Concert Hall! Even if she drives the speed limit, she'll be there in less than ten minutes!!"

Oh, dear.

It seemed Akashi Mitsu-chan went on the attack when she felt cornered. Just swinging around a knife would only kill one or two people, so she had chosen to drive a tanker truck of poison into the concert hall so she could kill every member of the group.

I asked a question just to be sure.

"Do you think we can evacuate everyone in time?"

"The midday concert is about to begin, so there are fifty thousand people in here. She'll ram into the building while we're slowly guiding everyone out! Unlike a dome, this is an outdoor concert hall, so the wind will carry the poison gas in even if we stop her with a barricade!!"

After shouting his answer back at me, the detective focused on his cell phone again.

"Hey, Sotobori. Where's the closest police box to here? Or the closest police car! There's gotta be one driving around to look for scalpers, right!?"

"Wh-what? There's probably one at the train station near there. If they don't put a police box there, all sorts of shady people would gather."

"Send the GPS signal to my cell phone. Please!"

“Wait a second. What are you planning!?”

“I have to do what I can.”

He ended the call, clicked his tongue, and kicked the corridor wall as hard as he could.

Some people must have heard the commotion because a few heads poked out from behind a corner. They were Tarot Girls 22 members. The Lovers, the Emperor, and the Hanged Man were all wearing their stage outfits and Anemura Kaede-chan the Empress was mixed in with them.

It was a fairly trivial thing that led people to truly resolve themselves for something.

The detective brushed a hand through his bangs and finally spoke to Anemura Kaede-chan.

“I’ll do something about this, so don’t lose to those numbers or that monster or whatever. What you’re doing here is worth risking one’s life for. And all the people gathered here think the same thing.”

With that, he ran off somewhere and left me behind.

One of the staff members with a towel around his neck gave a dumbfounded comment.

“He was asking where a police car is, wasn’t he? Don’t tell me he’s going to run off on his own.”

I heard a loud sound.

It was only after I heard it that I realized my hands had grabbed at the man’s neck and slammed him against the wall.

“You don’t seem to understand a thing about this, so let me enlighten you.”

But I did not care.

I had seen all sorts of crimes, but I simply couldn’t stand it when someone survived after standing around without a thought in their head and without making any effort whatsoever.

“He was asking about the police cars because he plans to stop the tanker truck by ramming it with his own car, you idiot!!”

Part 13 (3rd person)

Uchimaku Hayabusa ran off the outdoor concert hall's grounds, descended the steps of a pedestrian bridge, and climbed into a police car parked on the side of the road. The uniformed police officer who had gotten out to look for scalpers cried out, but Uchimaku ignored him and drove off.

He ignored the law and pulled out his cell phone while driving.

"What's wrong, Sotobori!? Where's the tanker truck data!?"

"Are you serious, dammit? Giving you that is tantamount to cop killing! And you have to be crazy to think you can stop a tanker truck with a small 4-door!!"

"I know that. I'm going to hit the connector from the side and detach the rear tank. Unlike in movies, that tank is solid enough to stand up to a bullet. We don't have to worry about it rupturing unless it's enveloped in flames and the internal pressure builds up. And the tank is only being towed along. If it's separated from the engine on the front, we can avoid the worst case scenario!!"

"But what about you!?"

"If I don't do this, fifty thousand people will be dragged into this. And putting up a barricade to stop it would sacrifice all the people on that area of the road. The only way to end this cleanly is to use an intersection to ram into the side from a right angle! And to do that, I need the truck's location. Are you going to help me or not!?"

"Dammit!!"

That shout was followed by a simple message from the map service. He displayed the map instead of the call and saw a new dot added.

The Toyosu area was made by several areas of reclaimed land connected by bridges. It was easier to predict the tanker truck's path than in Shinjuku or Shibuya which were filled with a complicated network of intersections between large and small roads.

"It looks like these three intersections would be the best ones. Sotobori, I'm going to ram the tanker to stop it, but I want to avoid any civilian deaths from secondary damages. There are more uniformed officers around the concert hall for security, right?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Report a bomb threat or whatever it takes. Just have those officers evacuate the pedestrians from the intersections. Right now!!”

In truth, Anemura Kaede the Empress had not liked singing, dancing, or gathering attention.

She had developed better or faster than her peers and the focus from her male classmates during PE had frightened her and brought about her current withdrawn personality.

She had wanted to overcome that part of herself.

She had been afraid that the part of herself she did not like would determine who she was.

That was why she had steered herself in the opposite direction she would have normally taken and that had just so happened to succeed. She had gradually come to enjoy singing and dancing, but she had never been working toward any original hope or dream like the police detective had said.

But what was it she had originally wanted to do?

What circles had she wanted to join once she had overcome her insecurities?

After thinking that far, she gave a small smile.

She had never thought about it.

Ultimately, that was her answer. She could not find anything she wanted to be proud of or that she wanted to protect, but that did not matter. She suddenly felt incredibly foolish for having feared those numbers or that monster.

If those things wanted to surpass her, she could let them.

Even if they did, she could continue on with what she believed would change her.

All of the people here proved that. She did not need the “number” of fifty thousand. If even a single person arrived wanting to see her performance, that was enough to prove it.

“U-um, what are we going to do? We can’t evacuate everyone, but can’t we at least evacuate the girls?”

The adults were discussing something, so she gathered her strength and cut in.

“No, let’s do this. If the crowd panics here, it could lead to deaths. We too should risk our lives for the people who have gathered here.”

She faced straight forward as she spoke and she had a quiet thought.

Now, let’s head out onto the battlefield that has been prepared exclusively for us.

The tanker truck was closer than expected.

It was ignoring traffic lights and signs and it was performing reckless U-turns, so horns were sounding all over.

It was five hundred meters from the intersection and it would arrive in less than thirty seconds.

Uchimaku gave a heavy sigh and stepped on the gas pedal.

But then…

“Detective☆”

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!?”

He let out a true scream when he saw a girl’s face in the rearview mirror. The police car weaved a bit while moving at full speed.

“Wha- You- Why the hell are you here!?”

“This whole incident has left me feeling exhausted. When you get involved with people who are still alive, you have a way of getting seriously reckless. If I hadn’t climbed aboard, you would’ve gone off to die, right? I won’t get mad, so just tell me.”

Hishigami Enbi the Mystery Freak could still grin despite saying she was using her own life as a shield.

“Now, detective. You aren’t going to get a middle school girl killed for your own selfishness, are you? Then what are you going to do? How are you going to protect all these innocent people’s lives?”

“Goddamn you!!”

He punched the steering wheel.

But then he switched over his train of thought.

“Thank you all for showing up even though we started on a weekday!!”

A girl shouted as loud as she could with a microphone in hand and with the Fool and the Universe on either side of her.

Anyone who did not know might think this was a safe zone filled with people who would only show kindness to Anemura Kaede the Empress, but in truth, this kind of audience was cruelly honest and frank

In a year or three or five, the same people here might not gather like this. The most trivial of things had brought them in and an equally trivial thing would have them leaving in droves. The lifespan of an idol was truly short. That was the first truth they were taught at their debut.

For that reason, this was a battlefield.

If she failed even once during these three days…no, during the three performances for this day alone, it could set a fatal series of events in motion.

“To be honest, I worried about a lot before today. I was exposed to baseless rumors, pursued by unseen numbers or monsters, and just about lost sight of what made this so enjoyable.”

At this crucial moment, she completely removed her mask for once.

And then she smiled.

This was not a fake smile. This was an expression that could only be seen when the mask was lowered.

“But in the end, I just can’t let all of this go. I was reminded of that fact! I love this stage to a lowly, shameful, and disgraceful degree!! And I won’t give it up to anyone. I am doing this for the fans who showed up today, for the staff who prepared the stage for me, and for the people who are secretly fighting to protect this stage!!”

The first song’s intro began to play and the lighting clearly changed as she gave one last shout.

“I will not back down!! No matter what!!”

“Whatever the case, I can’t change my plan now. I have only one shot at this and fifty thousand lives are on the line!”

“And? You aren’t someone who will tell a minor to die because of that, are you?”

Uchimaku clicked his tongue and removed his seat belt.

“We can use the reclining lever. But let me be clear. Even this only has a fifty-fifty chance of survival! I’ll do what I can, but don’t blame me if you die!!”

“Sure, sure. I like the look in your eyes. That’s the detective I love.”

They were approaching the final intersection.

He kept the police car at full speed despite the traffic light.

And then a giant form entered from the side and blocked their way.

“Found it!”

“She looks pretty surprised.”

Someone with a clearly shocked expression sat in the tanker truck’s driver’s seat. And it seemed even someone trying to kill fifty thousand people would honk their horn.

But it was too late.

With two people aboard, the police car rammed into the side of the tanker truck’s connector at full speed.

The small, cute police car almost seemed to slip below the truck and it was turned to scrap in an instant. The sounds of shattering glass and bending metal exploded into the air.

Its height was literally crushed down to less than half of what it had been.

Meanwhile, the truck's connecter had a great strain put on it as it was lifted up from below. As it twisted, a solid sound of snapping burst out. The rear tank rolled along like a toy and scattered orange sparks as it scraped along the asphalt. The front portion slammed into the pole for the traffic light and stopped moving.

There was no explosion or poison gas.

All that remained was the continuous sound of glass shards falling onto the asphalt.

The police car had been smashed flat and nothing remained of the driver's seat or the back seat.

A clanking sound came from within the back door that had been crushed beyond recognition. Someone was kicking it. The door's latch must have been broken in the impact because it opened with a loud creak.

Uchimaku Hayabusa and Hishigami Enbi were embracing each other in the back seat's foot space.

Just before the impact, Enbi had pulled the reclining lever and pulled Uchimaku toward her when his chair had fallen back.

"Ow, ow, ow," said Uchimaku. "H-how's the outdoor concert hall?"

"It's fine, of course."

"Any damage to the surrounding area?"

"There was a good bit of destruction, but it doesn't look like anyone died. The tank's contents are fine too."

"Can we even get out of here?"

"Eh heh. I'm fine with staying in here like this for a while longer."

"This is no time for cruel jokes."

The Aburatori human control Package surrounding the Tarot Girls 22 had been stopped. The one used by the *large criminal organization* was still an unknown, though. It was unclear how far the data corruption from the competition had spread, so the risk of a future incident remained until they confirmed that the Package had been completely brought to an end.

Part 14 (3rd person)

The national TV stations did not provide special news broadcasts unless something truly major happened. The internet news sites received information faster, but they lacked credibility.

Surprisingly, radio was treated as the medium that had both immediacy and credibility.

That was why the old system still remained after so long.

Inside a black luxury car caught in a traffic jam, a middle-aged man breathed a sigh of relief while listening to the announcer on a special-order audio system that included vacuum tubes.

“So they somehow managed to avoid the worst case scenario.”

As a part of the Comfort Association, the Japanese branch of a *large criminal organization*, they had secretly completed a Package involving an Aburatori. Due to growing to a global scale, conflicts could break out between the members of different nationalities and cultures, so this human control Package was meant to bring them all together. The Comfort Association wanted nothing more than to keep their business running smoothly, but the foreign members could view it as the Japanese branch attempting to take control of the entire organization.

They had needed to control the underlings who could lose control and reveal the Package’s existence.

A slender young man known as a fortuneteller sat in the car. A voice slipped out from between his lips that could barely be seen moving.

“It is too soon to say everything is over. The AD behind this, Akashi Mitsu, will be taken in by the police. She will be thoroughly investigated, including her mental state. If they find any trace of the Package, the risk of the foreign members finding out returns.”

“Th-that’s true.”

The middle-aged man pulled a bottle of red wine from a small refrigerator.

“But risks we know are easy to eliminate. There are countless ways to make it look like the vehicle transporting her was in an accident. If we eliminate her, we can eliminate any trace of the Pack-…”

“More importantly, this is where it all begins for me. The risk of competition with a similar Package has now been eliminated.”

The middle-aged man frowned at being interrupted.

But he realized he could not move his face. His body would not even make the slightest of movements. While in the awkward pose of grabbing the wine bottle, he desperately tried to move his eyes that could not even blink, but his body would not even accept that command. He felt the pain of his eyeballs gradually drying.

“What…did you…do?”

His mouth could move, but he did not realize this was because the man behind it was toying with him.

At some point a thin tablet had appeared in the young man’s hands.

“Have you gone senile? Why would you have someone outside the organization assemble the human control Package to manage and manipulate every single member of your *large criminal organization*? Countless backdoors can be placed in something like that.”

At least three handguns were hidden within arm’s reach, but he could not even move his fingertips.

“You don’t mean…you betrayed us? What are you after!? Are you with another organization…or the police?”

“Have you forgotten?”

The young man opened a free website creating app on the tablet. He could lay out the text and images to freely create his own online news articles.

Yes.

The Aburatori they had used was a rare sort of Youkai that had actually been mentioned in newspapers during the Meiji period. This young man had used that fact to control the Youkai by writing fictional newspaper articles on a closed network that no one else could read.

"Perhaps your everyday life is just so bloody that you have forgotten."

The fortuneteller's tone changed as he spat out those words.

He brushed up his bangs and his face was covered in silent hatred.

"Long ago, there was a child hitman. The child was altered accordingly and forced to bear that fate he did not want. A certain old-fashioned detective truly tried to save that child. …Have you really forgotten why that detective died?"

"…"

Most people were unaware, but that old-fashioned spirit had been carried on by the police officer named Sotobori Gaku and it had pulled the trigger that drove a man known as a fortuneteller. Even a dead man who was only spoken of in bars as a distant memory had a life and that life could influence how others lived their lives.

Most people were unaware that a certain life someone had found precious had been cruelly taken.

And it had been taken by the young hands of a sobbing child who had been forced into the role of hitman.

"I have been waiting for this moment."

The young man who had once been a child gave a thin smile.

"If I ran around assassinating people with a gun, killing one or two would be the most I could manage. That would end with those who truly set up that killing realizing what I was after. And even if I crushed the nearby Japanese branch, I would only be damaging a single leg of a global criminal network. So I have been waiting for the moment when I could grasp it all and crush it. I have been waiting for so very, very long."

"Fortune…tellerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!"

The man shouted and shouted and shouted.

But it was already over.

There was no way to overturn it now.

"I have only given a single instruction. Every member around the world will turn themselves into the police and answer honestly when asked what they have done wrong. I doubt anyone will be saved by a malfunction due to that conflict with the other system. I will not even allow you to die. You will get a front row seat to watch your empire crumble before your eyes.”

The wine bottle slipped from the middle-aged man’s hand.

It shattered on the floor and the red liquid scattered everywhere.

The young man opened the black luxury car’s door and slowly stepped out.

The traffic jam was showing no sign of ending.

As he weaved between the lines of cars on foot, someone called out to him.

It was a taxi driver.

“What’s this? Is it actually faster to walk?”

“Yes. Moving ahead bit by bit on my own two feet may be better.”

“I’ve got a passenger in the back. I feel bad having the meter go up as time goes on, so maybe I should ask if they just want to get out.”

“Perhaps. This congestion seems to be due to an accident, so it is unlikely to clear up anytime soon.”

“No way! Really?”

“Yes. A police car and tanker truck collided at a large intersection. Fortunately, it seems no one died.”

The fortuneteller said that with true jealousy in the bottom of his heart and he walked off through the traffic jam.

He silently vanished while leaving behind the result of his revenge.

Chapter 3: Sunekosuri / No One Can Predict the Future

Part 1 (3rd person)

An unmanned train station was surrounded by tranquil rural scenery.

The platform had no roof, a few clumps of zebra grass grew on the gravel road, and that grass blew in the cool autumn wind. The sky was a clear blue and a great number of dragonflies filled it.

A man in a suit sat alone on a bench that had long gone unused. He was on the border between middle-aged and elderly, yet he was quite muscular.

No train was coming.

The station had originally had fewer than ten trains stop by in a day and the line had been closed over half a year earlier. Much to their annoyance, those who had used the line were forced to use the less-convenient community bus. They complained, but the level of convenience brought by the trains was still something they could let go if they had to. And as time went on, the station went from being “unmanned” to being “abandoned”.

The man had chosen to sit here because he loved the scenery.

He held a chilled can of beer and a bucket filled with lots of ice and cans sat at his feet.

“Hello,” he said out of the blue.

Someone else had appeared on that closed station that should have been forgotten by everyone.

A woman wearing the ridiculously revealing outfit of a tank top and hot pants had arrived at some point.

Her name was Hishigami Mai.

Hers was a well-known name within a certain small industry.

“Sit down,” said the man while glancing over at Mai with beer in hand. “The scenery from here is wonderful. All those Intellectual Villages are remaking the rural areas into theme parks, so this truly natural Japanese scenery is dying out.”

"Do you always do this?"

"No, this is a recent thing. Something led me to start reflecting on life."

Hishigami Mai sat next to the man while listening to him.

The paint was coming off the wooden bench that creaked under their weight.

The man spoke quickly while looking up at the dragonflies moving freely through the sky.

"I have cancer. The doctor said I had three months to live, but that was two years ago. I could die at any moment, but I've gotten sick of being driven by fear. If I could die tomorrow, I want to live with no regrets. This helped me rethink some things."

"And that's what led to this?"

With some exasperation on her face, Mai looked around the area once more.

She saw a rural unmanned train station. A few clumps of zebra grass grew on the gravel road, that grass blew in the cool autumn wind, and the sky was filled with a great number of dragonflies.

However…

That scenery was covered in enough red to completely overturn that impression.

A quick glance at the clumps of flesh lying around was enough to know that more than twenty men had been killed instantly.

"They said they were going to develop this land," bluntly stated the man after taking a sip of his beer. "Is this what you call the end of an era? Japan's rural areas are constantly pressured to either join the Intellectual Villages or develop into a regional city. And it's all because these idiots are trying to increase the value of the land without knowing the difference between the real thing and a fake. So I invited them out here and killed them."

A long, narrow object lay on the man's lap.

It looked like a sword inside a simple scabbard, but it technically was not. It was bamboo whittled down to look like a sword.

It was a deadly weapon.

Just as a bamboo leaf or book page could cut one's finger, even a bamboo sword could kill if the angle and speed were properly calculated out. This man was skilled enough in the art of swordplay to easily cut through someone's neck or torso with it. Due to how light the blade was compared to one of metal, the man was said to be able to strike five times in the span of a single breath. That allowed him to ignore the fact that this weapon could not block an opponent's attack.

Also, the bamboo needed to make the sword could be easily acquired at any part of the archipelago except for Hokkaido. Even if it broke, he could acquire another as long as he had a knife. There was a danger of a piece of the bamboo remaining in the corpse's wound, but bamboo swords could be burned. If he burned the murder weapon after each job and acquired a new one, a plant DNA test was not a problem. Even if they had clear evidence, it was useless without anything to compare it to.

The ease of acquiring the weapon also helped him bring a murder weapon into cordoned-off or closely-monitored areas. For that matter, having a bamboo sword found during an inspection or police questioning was not a problem. They could even be carried on airplanes.

It was truly the tool of a professional.

"C'mon, now. Surely you've realized that the reason for killing doesn't really matter." Mai sounded bored. "You're the type of person that can only live while fighting. You wish to fight and only then do you start searching for a reason to fight. This business with the real scenery and concrete land development didn't really matter."

"It's not even that innocent." The man smiled while swishing around the little bit of beer left in the can. "I'm a professional. All of my jobs were complete shit, but I have pride in my skill. I just can't stand that it will be disease that kills me. I can't bear a quiet death. As a professional, I want a formidable enemy's blade to finish me. I thought someone would eventually come for me if I went on a bit of a rampage. I kept doing it, but I've somehow managed to live this long. I'm from an older generation, so I will say a woman assassin was a bit unexpected. But I guess that's another sign of the changing times."

“Whatever your reasons, you did a good job killing that many people. Even the higher ups of Hyakki Yakou aren’t sure what to do. If you’d taken official jobs, you’d probably be given an award or a trophy or something, but skipping that process means you have to be executed.”

“Ha ha. I forgot to mention it, but while I’m a professional, I also have pride in never working for anyone else. I wouldn’t have accepted those jobs even if you’d asked.”

He took one last swig of beer, shook the can to make sure it was empty, and easily crushed it in one hand.

“So, miss, I’ve forgotten if this is the fortieth or fiftieth time, but I’ll ask you the same thing I’ve asked so many times before: will you watch over this man’s final moments?”

“Sure.”

Hishigami Mai readily agreed.

She spoke with the lightness of a child promising to play with a friend that weekend.

However, this promise concerned a true fight to the death between professionals.

“*But it’s already over.*”

The man’s shoulders shook as he sat in the bench.

He suddenly realized he did not even have the strength to stand.

Completely dumbfounded, only his lips moved.

“When did you stab me?”

“Far earlier than you are probably thinking.”

Mai shrugged while sitting next to him.

Something stood straight out from between the man’s neck and collarbone. It was a needle as long as a human’s index finger and it was stabbed all the way to the base.

“A killer needle,” he said with a smile. “How much work did it take you to reach this moment?”

"It took seventy-two hours from the moment I took the job to the moment I could envision your corpse. It was not as powerful a dream as love, but you could perhaps call it a longing."

Mai also smiled thinly.

"I don't like using special weapons because disguising it as an accident or suicide is safer, but I decided to show some respect to someone who has been in this business longer than me. What do you think?"

"You did well. These days, you don't often see people kill with a needle that isn't covered in poison or anesthetic. Also, you placed the tip right in front of the vital point so my own muscles would push it in when I tensed them. It's a lot like serving a still-moving fish."

Satisfied, the man leaned back in the bench and slowly closed his eyes.

He looked like he was savoring the moment as he spoke.

"It's been a while since I last saw the real deal. I can't help but be satisfied after receiving this kind of treatment."

"I would like to ask one thing."

Hishigami Mai sounded perfectly casual as she looked up into the rural sky.

"You are a legend in this small industry, so how did you fall this far? If you had wanted to, you could have suppressed the fear of cancer."

"Like I said, that was just what started it," he replied slowly with his eyes closed. "People like us are invincible while we race forward without turning back. But there are moments when we want to look back. That is a mere temptation. It is the fingertips of the grim reaper stroking down our spine. I knew that. I really did."

"But your deadly disease gave you one last push in that direction?"

"I turned back and saw the path I'd walked down. I also saw what I had gained from it all. …I will not say what it was I saw there, but I want to die in battle. After all, I would prefer not to die along with my enemy."

Those were his final words.

His arm dangled down while still holding the crushed can.

He remained leaning back in the bench, but his head drooped forward. He almost looked like he had dozed off.

A legend had come to its end.

“I know what you saw,” muttered Mai now that she was alone. “You saw nothing, didn’t you? After countless fights to the death, you assumed you had gained so much, but when you turned back, there was nothing there. But it was your own weakness that made you despair at that.”

Or perhaps this man had been the same.

He may have told himself over and over again that he understood that.

He may have been afraid of truly understanding it and had simply pretended that he did.

“It’s over.”

Hishigami Mai pulled out a large satellite phone and called someone.

She looked to the dead man who seemed to be sleeping next to her and the countless corpses he had scattered around.

“This was an official job, so I can leave the cleanup to you, right? Right, right. I’ll leave all this here and head back. I’d like my payment right away. …But this one might be a little tricky.”

Part 2

The term Sunekosuri referred to small canine Youkai like me. We were about thirty centimeters tall and may have somewhat resembled a toy shiba inu. We had no scary traits that would lead to someone's death. Instead, we had long been famous for rubbing up against traveler's shins. Hence why we're known as Sunekosuri or "shin rubbers".

I was something like a mascot character with nothing dangerous in my appearance or traits.

Nevertheless, I belonged to Hyakki Yakou, a giant underworld organization that would scare even a crying child into silence.

"Yes, yes. Outta the way, outta the way. I won't stop you from wasting the organization's money with your existence, but at least stay out of the way of the other Youkai. Do you really think you're worth causing even the slightest delay for me, the one known as the queen of the Mamedanuki world?"

"Mh!"

How can you say that when you're even shorter than me!?

"You're not doing anything either! You just sit around smoking day in and day out. And how can you call yourself a queen with those things swaying down between your legs!?"

"Don't you dare go there, you fool!! A Mamedanuki transforms by spreading their scrotum, so I can't help it, now can I!? Also, I work as the lady's body double, so it's for the best if I have nothing to do!!"

"Call her Hafuri-sama! Don't refer to the head of Hyakki Yakou as 'the lady'!!"

"What was that? You wanna fight!?"

"Why you…!!"

The Mamedanuki and I got into a scuffle as usual. To others, it might have looked like a fluffy ball rolling around, but for us, it was a serious battle.

But then someone else arrived.

Instead of more Youkai, it was two humans.

“What’s this? What’s this? Some cute things are playing around. Let me join!”

One was Hishigami Mai. Using human standards, she had a nice body. However, she was a freelance agent that did not actually belong to Hyakki Yakou and she specialized in killing. In her field, it was said that simply meeting her meant your death.

“What are you two fighting about?”

The other was Hafuri-sama. As I had said, she was the head of Hyakki Yakou. The kimono-wearing girl was only about ten, but Hyakki Yakou emphasized bloodline.

The Mamedanuki and I quickly jumped back from each other.

“Ah, Hafuri-sama!”

“Milady, um, you see…!!”

As soon as the two of us spoke up, we glared at each other again.

“I told you to call her Hafuri-sama!!”

“Why are you being so distant!? You aren’t going to double-cross her the second you run into trouble, are you!?”

Sparks flew between us, Mai-san laughed uproariously, and Hafuri-sama brought a hand to her forehead and sighed.

I then noticed a Youkai leaning against Hafuri-sama’s small leg.

It looked a lot like a five centimeter stuffed animal.

“Daddy, what’re you doing?”

“Hm?” Mai-san stiffened a bit. “Don’t tell me you’re a dad! When you look like that!?”

“I-I don’t have to explain anything to you.”

“And look how cute he is! I want to stick a fastener on his butt and make a cellphone strap out of him!!”

“I’ll do whatever you ask! Just stay away from my kid! It scares me that I could actually see you doing it!!”

Dammit. She specializes in sabotage, so she spotted my weakness right away!

Mai-san grinned with great interest, so I averted my gaze and spoke half in desperation.

“L-laugh if you want, but the reason I gave up my peaceful life for this kind of work was to find my wife who vanished one day!!”

“What kind of hardboiled motivation is that!? It doesn’t match your appearance at all!!”

Part 3

Hishigami Mai-san and I were work partners on a provisional basis.

And that meant I was along on underworld business worthy of the name Hyakki Yakou.

“The G20 summit meeting sounds like some terribly formal event, but doesn’t it feel more close to home when you hear it’s happening at Hakone? The cabinet members of the various foreign nations were insistent on holding the meeting at a Japanese hot spring town.”

Inside a soba restaurant near the train station at the entrance of Hakone, the elderly and clearly bored restaurant owner watched the TV. The place was almost deserted despite it being lunchtime, but he didn’t seem to care much.

As a Youkai, I did not much like concrete or precision equipment, but this was little enough that I could still bear it. That may have been because the city was deep in the forest and the mountains. Mai-san was slurping up a combination of cheap kitsune and tanuki soba and I asked a question while rubbing up against her shin.

“Don’t you find this mission strange? Why would they ask you to wait in Hakone until further orders?”

“Hm? Well, they might need to locate the target before sending me in to attack. That G20 meeting is going on, right? They wouldn’t succeed in assassinating a cabinet member, but some dangerous person might show up all the same. I can use this chance to earn some points by capturing some idiot who would normally vanish without a trace.”

“I-I see.”

“But they really chose a complicated place for an international meeting. That might be part of the trap to lure in that supposed idiot.”

“?”

“Hakone is divided between a few Intellectual Villages that are primarily hot spring towns and a regional city that supports the infrastructure. We're in that city. A long time ago, it was common to combine cities, towns, and villages. Nowadays, they actually divide them up further to help push their own brand name."

"And how is that complicated?"

"The Intellectual Villages thoroughly reproduce people's image of rural Japan and make a brand name out of it, but that means they can't make department stores or shopping malls. They have to use online stores to shop and that leads to hubs for electric trucks being built in a donut around the Intellectual Villages."

"Um, in other words, the Intellectual Villages make a lot of money but have almost no services, so they join with the regional cities that have almost no money but can supply the necessary services?"

"Officially, yes. However, it actually has ill will complexly wrapped all around it. For example, the hospitals have plenty of helicopter ambulances, but they aren't used when a patient turns up in the regional city. After all, those helicopters are expensive, so they'll only use them for the Intellectual Villages, even though the hospitals themselves are in the cities. …Meanwhile, the Intellectual Villages are upset that they have to bear the burden of someone else's debt. They want to know why they have to pay such high taxes for 'regional financial health'."

"So when you say complicated…"

"If some large-scale incident occurs, it'll be heard to tell whether it was targeting the G20 or caused by the local societal conflict. And a professional would be able to slip in and hide within the hatred permeating the area. This is a giant pain in the ass. If you assume someone is an assassin, you might find you attacked a local kid spray painting a protest on the wall. …Of course, the opposite can happen too."

Just as we were discussing those issues, a change came over the tone of the voice on the restaurant's television. I looked over in confusion and found the easygoing daytime talk show had been interrupted by a news program.

Rather than a proper studio, the footage showed an editing room with tons of monitors lined up.

"Is this an emergency broadcast?" I asked.

"How should I know?"

With a G20 summit meeting in town, an emergency broadcast was no laughing matter.

I focused on the screen while a young female newscaster spoke stiffly.

"Hishigami Mai, who was visiting the city, has been found in pieces in the mountains of Hakone. The body's injuries are severe and the police are investigating it as a possible murder or a possible wild animal attack."

It felt like time had ground to a halt.

The restaurant owner did not understand the gravity of the situation, so he still looked bored.

I looked up at Mai-san and she shrugged.

"How should I know?"

Regardless of what she said, I could tell her "scent" had changed.

That "scent" had grown much more dangerous.

"But this is strange."

"Y-yes, it is strange for a false report to be spread so widely."

"Not what I meant," she cut in. "I don't use the name Hishigami Mai in everyday life. In fact, there is technically no birth registration under that name. In my family, the 'Hishigami women' are seen as abominations. Normally, they're killed at birth, so a Hishigami woman is one that was unleashed upon the world after somehow escaping that fate."

"…"

"So the name Hishigami Mai may exist, but it isn't recorded anywhere. And with no records, no one can use it. If you know my name, it means you've taken at least one step away from the normal world. And that means…"

This was real trouble.

That was the obvious conclusion and Mai-san was the person most directly involved.

And yet she was smiling.

“Someone in the same underworld business as me is challenging me to a fight that involves the occult. If that show itself was part of a Package or some other gimmick, this might be a bit of a problem.”

Part 4

Beep.

“The number you are attempting to reach is not currently in use. Please double check the number and…”

Beep beep.

“Uuh!? You!? But you’re supposed to be dead! Click!!”

Beep beep beep.

“Huh? What is it, Mai-san? They’re saying on the news that you were ripped to pieces. Did you get even Enma to hate you?”

Was there really any reason to be so cautious after a single news story?

While I wondered that, Mai-san sat on the hood of the rental car and called different numbers on her large satellite phone. She had tried contacting some people who were on a similar level to herself, but they had refused to talk to her until this one that she finally got through to.

“Only the third one? That was surprisingly easy. I was sure everyone in this thing’s memory would refuse.”

“That’s just how dangerous you are, Mai-san,” said the man on the phone. “If someone’s willing to switch between enemy and ally if it comes down to it, you’ll definitely view them as an enemy. And I’d much rather not fight you. Not to mention that fighting isn’t my specialty.”

Incidentally, we were in the parking lot of a supermarket near the Hakone train station.

But even this close to the station, the entire area wasn’t covered with asphalt and concrete. I had heard that Hakone was divided between the city portion and multiple Intellectual Villages, but it seemed everywhere had a lot of green. As a nature-loving Youkai, I wasn’t about to complain.

“Supplier, how much do you know?”

“Not much. Just that the shadow-net is going nuts over the local Hakone news that you died.”

The parking lot was covered in gravel and located right next to some woods.

Mweh heh heh. Listening to this dangerous conversation is scaring me, so how about I take a nice stroll through the woods? Time to get some negative ions.

“Be careful, Mai-san. The way to deal with you includes a lot of fear and violence. From what I’ve seen online, everyone has their doubts about this, but the people you’ve been holding down might use this ‘fall of the queen’ as their chance to act. And if they all act together, they might get a little full of themselves.”

“You’re making too much out of those petty thieves, but I suppose you’re right. Oh, damn. Do you think they’ll look through my tax haven bank accounts, my armories, or my hideouts? Well, I’ve set them up so Rank 1 is all traps or bait, Rank 2 will satisfy them, and Rank 3 and above won’t be found.”

“After they pluck off the bug’s wings and legs like that, some of them might go in for the kill. I don’t know if simply killing you is the goal or if that emergency news broadcast was part of a Package that uses a Youkai to broadcast records into the past, but this isn’t an easy one to predict. It is about you, after all.”

“This is going pretty far for harassing me. I guess I’ll kill them.”

“Ha ha. You’d have to be an idiot to make an enemy of a monster like you. I’ll keep up my job as a supplier since a war is a great time to make money. So what do you need?”

“Isn’t your hometown Tokyo? Did you bring that huge RV to Hakone?”

“No, I didn’t go that far. But I have my ‘products’ split up and hidden around the country. If you need something, you can use whatever you find in my Hakone warehouse. But you’ll be buying whatever you take, not renting it.”

“I see.” Mai-san thought for a moment. “Then can you spread a rumor that I’m on my way to that warehouse? I’ll buy up the building and everything inside.”

“Thanks for your business☆”

She ended the call and pulled something long and thin from the pocket of her hot pants. It looked like a case that held a few cough drops, but…

“Okay, Sunekosuri. Let’s start by gathering weapons and equipment for this war. I really hope that news broadcast wasn’t a part of a Package, I’m sure there are two or three layers of traps laid out, and there will probably be a lot of idiots who don’t know about the job we’re on, so let’s finish our preparations while they’re all rushing toward the Supplier’s warehouse.”

“Weapons?”

“Just the handgun hidden in my boot and the Deadly Dragon Princess aren’t enough. I’d like some heavier weaponry if I’m going to fight a war on my own.”

“B-but where will you get it? Are you saying there’s a weapon’s shop in Hakone like in an RPG town?”

“A G20 summit is being held in Hakone right now. To prevent any possible terrorist bombings, all of the coin lockers and trunk rooms will be inspected. So what happens to the people who normally hide their dangerous things in places like that? I have a feeling they’ll be rushing to hide their stuff elsewhere.”

“Y-you mean you’ll be stealing weapons from real terrorists and gangs?”

“Everyone has their own turf in the underworld, so it could cause a different sort of trouble if they tried to hide those dangerous objects out of town. That means they’ll be hiding them in the part of Hakone the police will most want to avoid. As one of Japan’s leading hot spring towns, it has to have an active volcano. If we dig up the area near the crater that’s filled with sulfuric gas, we’ll find plenty of weapons and ammo packed in plastic. It’s where I’d hide them if I was them. So…”

She trailed off there.

She slowly turned her head and found an old woman wearing pitch black mourning clothes.

The smiling woman swung her arm horizontally and a surprisingly long blade shot from her sleeve with a high-pitched sound. In fact, it was long enough to qualify as a sword rather than a knife.

Mai-san, however, gave an exasperated sigh and rubbed her temple with her index finger.

“So Idiot #1 is between B-class and C-class, huh? Old lady, I hate to say this kind of thing, but do you really understand the situation here?”

The old woman did not respond.

She simply swung her head slightly to the side while still smiling.

And she took a slow and silent step forward.

“Did you think someone with a sword had an overwhelming advantage over an unarmed opponent and that you could win if you attacked before I could find any weapons? …If so, you were sorely mistaken.”

Mai-san gently and slowly spoke as if trying to convince the woman to back down.

She lightly waved the case in her hand as she continued.

“Have you still not caught on? If you grab someone’s hair so they face upwards and open their windpipe, you can easily kill them by throwing a cough drop inside. And it’ll be treated as an accident that is barely recorded. …When people refer to the seven tools of a professional assassin, they’re referring to something like this.”

Part 5

"Now, let's see if we can find them. I'm sure the weapons will be buried with a chip like the ones on the legs of endangered species, but the magnetic field around an active volcano is so unstable I'm not sure if we'll be able to pick up that weak signal."

Thirty minutes later, Mai-san had riven the rental car to the crater of the active volcano supporting Hakone's hot spring town. It was still within Hakone, the cabinet members and other leaders of the G20 would clearly not be approaching it for the summit, and it was dangerous to investigate due to the volcanic gasses. Mai-san successfully dug up the firearms and such that the local underground businessmen had temporarily moved there.

"Tremble tremble."

"Good, good. Just as I thought, they were buried in the spot with an obvious sign left behind. I've got PDWs, grenades, a semi-auto sniper rifle, and even a .50 caliber heavy machine gun. That should be plenty."

"Shake shake."

"Hm? What's wrong, Sunekosuri? Is the car's air conditioning on too high?"

"N-no! That isn't it…"

Her success here meant she had easily eliminated the old woman in mourning clothes, and in this business, "eliminating" someone had a specific meaning.

"Next up on the news," said an announcer on the radio. "At just past noon today, an old woman was found collapsed near Hakone Station. She was quickly taken to the hospital, where she was confirmed dead. She had no obvious external wounds and had a cough drop in her throat, so the police are viewing it as an accident."

How can this announcer speak so coldly about this!?

It's like he's casually talking about the end of the world!!

"Wh-wh-what will… What will we do now?"

"Hmm. To handle this in order, the emergency broadcast about 'Hishigami Mai's' death would probably come first. That's the largest part of this and the part I least want to leave unattended. Let's go shake up the TV station while viewing the whole place as an enemy."

Mai-san sounded completely carefree as she said that with all sorts of weapons and bombs filling the rental car's trunk.

That sounded a lot like what a terrorist would say, didn't it!?

I continued trembling and looked back over to the driver's seat. Mai-san was still smiling.

"Hm? I'm not just going to blow up the station or anything. And searching out the culprit with a long-term infiltration of the station is more my sister's kind of thing. It would be faster to just cut the Achilles' tendon, so I think I'll go attack the highest manager and grab all their company secrets."

"B-but TV stations are considered high-risk targets for terrorism, right? The security will be strict, so I don't think you'll be able to get at them that easily."

"It's true it would be hard to shake them up on my own, but the rich almost always have enemies. I can get some help from them."

"You mean the enemy of your enemy is your friend? But how are you going to actually find the enemies of this top manager?"

"I can search for that online. Rural areas tend to have one national station and one locally-owned station. Wealth and power have a way of gathering in one place and they have a monopoly on the freedom of press and advertisement. Let's watch some TV and see what local companies have frequent ads. Then we just have to search online for other companies in the same business. They'll be hurting from the effects of those ads, so they'll have a grudge against the TV station," explained Mai-san. "Also, I'm not openhearted enough to call a complete stranger my friend just because we have a common enemy. Calling them a friend is like inviting in a new enemy."

"?"

Then…?

Part 6

Tremble tremble.

Tremble tremble tremble tremble tremble tremble!!

I-I just can't stop shaking!!

I was in the underground parking garage of an apartment complex in Hakone's city area, but the problem was not that I was surrounded by thick concrete. Something much worse was right in front of me.

Mai-san held an insecticide can that emitted smoke to eliminate roaches and she tossed it into the trunk of an Italian sports car. And she did not hesitate to slam the trunk closed.

She ignored the coughing and banging that were shaking the trunk from the inside.

"A fitting end for some insects."

"W-wait a second!! Weren't they normal people!?"

"Normal people don't own foreign cars, live in nice apartments, and have membership cards to exclusive golf courses. Surely you could tell what terrible people they were."

"Uuh… W-well I did find it strange."

"They were probably villains with giant piles of dirty money. Rural TV stations generally run in the red and will jump at any proposal for a sponsorship. Since they rejected mine, they must have something shady to keep hidden. And I checked on the background of the people I targeted, which is why you didn't seriously try to stop me. The worst part of this business is how the enemy of evil isn't good. Not that I'm one to talk."

She sat on the trunk and turned to the 1seg TV on her cellphone.

"Hm. I've already killed a few, so there must be a system in place to keep any inconvenient news from getting out. But if the station is blocking it, that means they're aware of the serial killings."

She seemed to be enjoying herself and she began calling someone with the phone.

“Hm? Yes, yes. Hello, hello. Can you connect me to the president right away? Oh, you can’t? I see. So this isn’t enough. Then I’ll just keep killing his enemies until he likes me.”

“That’s just cruel!!” I shouted.

If Persons A, B, and C were a problem for Person D and Persons A, B, and C began dying in suspicious ways, it was obvious who everyone would suspect first.

She must have been waiting while being transferred over because Mai-san removed the phone from her ear and placed her index finger against her lips to say “be quiet or I’ll kill you”.

“Yes, yes. Good day, good day. With someone as busy as you, making a normal appointment could mean waiting months before speaking with you, so I took emergency measures.”

“D-d-do you have any idea what you’ve done? Y-you-you’ve…!”

“Yes, *I killed some hindrances just as you asked me to*. Oh, is this being recorded to drag the truth from me? I see. That’s fine. We can use that recording as my bill. *President, I killed them all, so pay me the hundred million you promised after the fact. You brought this job to me, after all.*”

If you knew a call was being recorded, you could easily falsify evidence.

Mai-san was two steps ahead of him in everything.

If she vanished here, the police would have to view the TV station president as the #1 suspect, so he could not simply reject her.

“Wh-what do you want to know?” he asked.

“Something I seriously doubt you want recorded. Let’s meet soon. And of course, I’ll be visiting you. Just relax there in the big leather chair of your office and wait for me☆”

Part 7

Hakone was divided between the city area at the base of the mountains and the natural area in the mountains, but I was surprised to find the TV station in question was in the mountains.

“Idiots, smoke, and broadcast antennae are all best placed as high as possible.”

Mai-san parked the rental car in the parking lot of the local station named Ashinoko TV and took me into the building. We had finally entered the mountains, but the modern building made me feel something similar to seasickness.

We rode the elevator up to the top floor.

The president’s office took up the entire floor and it contained an old man with gray hair and a custom-made suit, a beautiful woman in a tight skirt, and several young muscular men.

Mai-san tilted her head.

“Who’s the woman?”

“I am Asano, his secretary.”

Mai-san tilted her head even further.

“And all the macho men?”

“Wh-when a dangerous person says she is visiting, it’s only natural to contact some skilled people. They work in the underworld as curse-reversal specialists. Normally, having these occult types wandering around the station would be-…”

“I see.”

Thirty seconds later…

No, fifteen seconds later.

In fact, it may have even been a single second or less.

To be honest, it was so vivid a scene that I lost all sense of time.

What had been such a tidy space a moment before was now covered in a dark-red liquid. The gray-haired president was curled up in a corner of the room and trembling. Everyone else had been slaughtered. Mai-san alone stood in the center of the large room.

“You said yourself that they’re curse-reversal specialists. With curses like the promise with a Yuki Onna or the request of an Ubume, you can reverse it as long as you know the trick behind it. I didn’t even have to bring out a weapon. You might’ve been better off with complete amateurs who had normal weapons instead of using a Youkai and doing it badly.”

“Wh-wha-what did you…?”

I was having trouble speaking and that grim reaper answered with a smile.

“Like I said. They were trying to remove my organs using the traits of a Youkai called the *Aburatori*, but they did a brilliant job of screwing it up and had it turn on them. Also, this might have originally been a trick to run a news story first and twist the truth afterwards. After all, the Aburatori brings confusion by being mentioned in newspapers. Honestly, they were far too naïve to extract the symbols like that. They did it so badly that it’s almost blasphemous. It’s like seeing someone take a first-class Pacific Bluefin and turn the whole thing into canned tuna. And yet someone with actual skill could have killed me in the very first attack with that.”

“Th-that’s just cruel. Aren’t you being a little too cruel!?”

“How? All I did was protect myself.”

Then why is the secretary dead too!? And with a fountain pen sticking out of the top of her head. It’s like she’s about to be cooked on a skewer!! Woof woof!!”

“There was no reason to kill her? Really? Not even one? Are you seriously saying that, Sunekosuri-chan? Don’t ignore the way of the world and try to say the right-hand of such a black-hearted man had never stepped out of line even once.”

Her expression did not change in the slightest.

She sat on the heavy table and spoke to the president.

“Tell me what you think I want to know and give me a clear answer. You have three chances. If you use them all up, you’ll be joining them. Got that?”

“I have a cruiser in Ashinoko Harbor and there’s a hidden safe onboard. The combination is…”

“Two more tries.”

“I did give the order to send the emergency broadcast about Hishigami Mai’s death!! But I was only doing what I was told to. I don’t know how that news fits into the Package!!”

“One more try.”

“Goudo Akira! She’s *their* contact. I don’t know anything more!! If I had looked further into it, I would have been killed too!!”

“I see. Goudo Akira, is it? Tell me how to spell it.”

After getting the information she needed, Mai-san picked me up and started toward the office’s door. As she did, she spoke without turning back.

“Oh, right. You take care of those bodies.”

“W-why do I have to do that!?”

“You can call the police if you want, but in court, I guarantee you it will eventually lead to you being found guilty. This world is an unfair place, after all.”

“…”

“You do business with occult assassins like me, right? Working in the news business gives you special access to some of the private information of the victims and you can leak ‘accidentally’ leak that information for them. Just contact them. They’ll know how to safely dump a body and get out the bloodstains.”

With that, she really did leave the president’s office.

After she hit the button and began waiting for the elevator, I asked what was on my mind.

“Wh-why did you go that far?”

"What good is it to think about that now?"

"They were part of an organization, just like us. Even if they were at the bottom level, won't the organization think about taking revenge now that you killed them?"

"Sunekosuri-chan, did you see the tattoo on the back of their hands?"

"Eh?"

"At first glance, it looks like a fashionable tribal tattoo, but it's actually the rank insignia for the organization Jouzai Senjou. They add a line each time they get promoted and enough of a mistake for a demotion gets the entire hand chopped off. They're a third-rate organization that doesn't at all live up to its name and they make their money by selling Packages to all sorts of criminals. But I killed every last one of their leaders during a past incident. The organization itself managed to get back on its feet, but I doubt they ever want anything to do with me again."

"You mean…"

"That president will likely go crying to them asking for some way of fighting back, but that will bring my name to the people at the top. Now, do you think anyone there still wants to fight me? If the alternative is being completely wiped out this time, they'll probably bury that president in the mountains for his connection to me. …Of course, I'll be stopping by to thank them later anyway."

"B-but you're just guessing. You don't actually know what that president will try to do, right?"

"Yeah, I tend to adlib. Still, I'd already guessed Jouzai Senjou was going to show up. They're the only organization that's cheap enough to infiltrate some local media for some grassroots information gathering."

The elevator arrived and the automatic doors opened to either side.

Mai-san did not hesitate to leave with that "execution device" still there.

"I gave him three chances and all I got were hints. And yet I told him to give me the clear answer I wanted."

Part 8 (3rd person)

Hyakki Yakou’s headquarters were mobile. It was made up of a large formation containing a V-shaped flying wing, a transport ship filled with spare parts, an in-flight refueling craft, and escort fighters.

The interior resembled the Imperial Court of the ancient capital or a noble’s old mansion, but it was actually a flying residence made from cutting-edge technology.

In one corner, a kimono-wearing girl of ten held a phone receiver to her ear.

Her name was Hafuri and she was the leader of the country’s largest Youkai-related organization.

“Sigh. I am not sure what to tell you. We still cannot contact Hishigami Mai either. And needless to say, you were the ones who set all this in motion, weren’t you?”

“That is not what I am talking about. She is a member of Hyakki Yakou, isn’t she? She has already killed four influential people and more than ten others in the president’s office of a regional TV station. And then that president committed ‘suicide’. If this continues any longer, her supervisor will be responsible. Are you sure you want that?”

“You seem to be mistaken about something, so let me explain. Hishigami Mai is nothing more than a freelance agent.”

“Are you saying you can’t send out your internal disciplinary department?”

“We sometimes make requests for jobs, but she does not actually belong to Hyakki Yakou. When she is fighting elsewhere, we do not directly support or protect her. In exchange, we have no way of punishing her. Unless the issue directly conflicts with our interest, that is.”

“I see.”

The Sunekosuri, an official member of Hyakki Yakou, was with Hishigami Mai, but for better or for worse, that fact was never brought up. Sometimes being of no help in a fight was actually useful. The Youkai would likely cry if he heard that, though.

“And I thought you were aware what the Hishigami women are like.” Hafuri sounded almost exasperated. “Hishigami is the general trading company that represents Japan and it primarily deals in heavy industry. But its head family still practices a bloody tradition: the Hishigami men and the Hishigami women. The concept is similar to the psychological terms Eros and Thanatos.”

“…”

“The Hishigami men focus on static gatherings while the Hishigami women focus on dynamic separations. They are divided between those who try to peacefully expand organizations and those who radically try to destroy organizations.”

For better or for worse, the Hishigami men had a powerful ability to make connections between people, so they had naturally formed a general trading company with great power.

Meanwhile, the Hishigami women’s traits meant they would smash that to pieces.

Neither of them was in the wrong. During times of chaos, the Hishigami men would rise to the forefront and build up a giant and stable system. During times of stagnation, the Hishigami women would rise to the forefront and destroy the giant and rotten system.

The Hishigami women were treated as ill omens, but they were merely catching wind of where the era was headed and acting accordingly.

“Simply put, a single Hishigami woman possesses enough power to destroy a global corporation. A certain Hishigami fell in love and is subconsciously trying to suppress her power of separation with the power of connection and another Hishigami has shown a desire to bind herself with the ‘obligation’ of a close relationship with Hyakki Yakou. …However, you have cut one of those threads. This battle is no longer based in Hyakki Yakou’s rules. It is now based in the rules of a Hishigami woman. Are you seriously trying to tell me you didn’t know what would happen then, Goudo Akira-san?”

“In other words, you’re saying Hyakki Yakou is useless? That’s fine. I will deal with the problem here, but be prepared for Hyakki Yakou’s influence to decrea- gbgch!?”

The call ended there.

Hafuri quietly looked down at the receiver, sighed, and placed it back on the phone.

She could only say “my condolences”.

Part 9

“Goudo Akira, hm?”

After checking on the safety of the explosives and transmitter, Mai-san climbed into the rental car.

“I didn’t expect this to be related to the Hishigami men. Is this turning into a family feud?”

“H-Hishigami?”

“Don’t worry about it. But it does simplify things. It might be hard for a normal person to target a member of the Hishigami general trading company, but I’m family. I know how they do things.”

“Th-then what are you going to do?”

She tapped on the car’s steering wheel and gave a simple answer.

“I’ll kidnap them.”

……

I may have looked like a dog, but I had my self-respect as an intelligent Youkai who had lived for hundreds of years. It was a testament to my courage that I managed to avoid pissing myself.

“H-h-hold it right there!! It’s probably far too late to be scolding you now, but I’m still going to yell at this! The entire world agrees that kidnapping is wrong!!”

“Uuh… I can’t believe you would give a serious lecture to a delinquent like me. …Teacher! Can I offer you my body in the guidance room!?”

“Not only did nothing I say reach you, but you’re acting completely inappropriately!”

No matter what you did, the bloodshed around her would never stop. There was not even a millimeter of hesitation in her operation of the steering wheel.

“B-by the way, where are we going?”

“Hell Pass. That’s one of the hot spring Intellectual Villages in the Hakone region. It’s a rare type that focuses on sightseeing rather than agriculture. Oh, and we’ll be making a slight detour on the way.”

“H-h-hell?”

“There are no crazy traditions there, so there’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s not unusual for places with hot springs and volcanoes to have hell in the name.”

“Th-that isn’t what I meant. That’s right in in the middle of where the G20 summit is being held! If you wander around with a handgun, you’ll be found right away and cause all sorts of trouble.”

“That’s why I said we’ll be making a slight detour.”

As always, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“An unauthentic souvenir shop in Hakone’s city area would probably work. I need some kind of native garb that hides my identity and looks a little religious. Like a fortune teller maybe. It’ll have to be something an Asian like me wouldn’t look out of place in. Hm… Maybe something from India.”

“?”

Fifteen minutes later, Mai-san had acquired the clothing and was driving to the Intellectual Village called Hell Pass. The mountain road twisted and turned, I was sent rolling all around on the passenger seat, and we finally approached the entrance to Hell Pass.

Instead of driving into the center of Hell Pass, Mai-san stopped in the parking lot of a roadside station for a transportation company and dragged me out of the car with her.

“Um?”

“I went to the trouble of changing my clothes, but they would do a thorough inspection if I drove the car into the summit meeting area. That would defeat the purpose of all this.”

She slowly and calmly walked toward Hell Pass while holding me in her arms.

W-will this really work?

Part 10

“Hey, you over there!!”

Thirty seconds after crossing into Hell Pass, a young man in a police uniform called out to us.

I knew it!!

Of course you’re going to stand out when you wear a gaudy, midriff-showing fortuneteller’s outfit in a hot spring town filled with a Japanese atmosphere! Hiding your mouth with the veil is completely pointless!!

The police officer gave us a perfectly warranted look of deep suspicion.

“Um… Excuse me, but can I see your face? Also, show me your ID and let me inspect your bag. Right now, we have to-…”

“Oh! I cannot show you inside bag. My religion only allows me to show purified grand master inside bag. Otherwise gathered virtue disappears!!”

“Eh? What? No, I’m not talking about that. This is a security iss-…”

“Wow, wow!! I come all the way to Intellectual Village to learn of superior Japan culture, but I am treated with such disrespect? What happened to freedom of religion?”

I could almost feel the sharp gazes of the surrounding people turning our way. The foreign cameramen and journalists here for the G20 leaders had spotted something interesting.

Mai-san pretended to sob while whispering to me as if lightly chewing on my triangular ear as she held me to her chest.

“(With the international G20 summit meeting going on, this place is filled with people from different countries and cultures: the cabinet members, their bodyguard teams, and the journalists who follow them. What do you think the headlines will be if a police officer who represents the country’s authority oppresses another culture’s religion? Criticizing the Japanese representative might become the central topic of tonight’s dinner party.)”

“That’s just mean!!”

“(Also, Intellectual Villages hate the police. Back when they were declining rural areas, the police wouldn’t even build a single police box and they would only leisurely make their way over from the police station when there was a robbery. The police may have changed their mind and want to make police boxes and stations there now that the areas have earned a bunch of money, but that doesn’t meant anyone is going to welcome them. Instead, they use home security systems and armed security guards for better self-security than a university. If this outsider messes up here, no one is going to step forward to shelter him.)”

“U-um, uh, um…”

The young police officer was clearly panicking and looking around in every direction. At this point, the poor civil servant had only two options.

He could grow excessively oppressive and aggressive and try to show off his authority or…

“M-my apologies. Please be on your way.”

He completely folded and grew very polite.

And thus Hishigami Mai-san boldly carried her weapons to her destination despite the strict security prepared for the gathering of G20 leaders and cabinet members.

Part 11

Our destination was an old high-class inn in the mountains.

It was a wooden multistory building instead of the usual flat structure of Japanese residences. Despite being located at the bottom of a green canyon, it rose high enough to poke up between the gaps in the mountains. It had been built by a temple carpenter and had a tradition of over two hundred years, so it looked more like a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple than it did a lodging facility. It was a lot like the stage of Kyoto's Kiyomizu-dera or the ocean torii of Hiroshima's Itsukushima Shrine in how the manmade object stole the focus of the scenery despite being surrounded by nature.

"W-we're going here?"

"I said Goudo Akira has a connection to Hishigami, didn't I? The Hakone region has countless safe zones, but you can narrow that down a lot if you focus on the ones supported by Hishigami. This one is the strongest, fanciest, and most comfortable, so it's perfect for the boss character's fortress."

Mai-san still wore the foreign fortuneteller's outfit, but she did not hesitate to enter the inn.

Needless to say, the waitresses' eyes opened wide.

"I was called here by Hishigami and it has to do with Youkai. No need to treat me like a guest, nothing happened here, and you didn't see anyone. That's how you should handle this."

When she mixed in a few keywords like that, the look in the eyes of the dozens…no, over a hundred workers clearly changed. It almost looked like the light vanished from their eyes. It was a strange sight indeed to see an entire group ignoring someone like this.

"If you know how things work, this is easy."

The great number of witnesses and the cutting-edge security meant nothing.

Mai-san boldly walked straight toward the VIP room that did not officially exist.

"Poor thing. They have so many shady meetings day in and day out that no one will even peek inside no matter how much of a commotion they hear."

It took only an instant to break the lock on the sliding door.

And it took maybe three seconds to restrain the target inside who was elegantly *talking on the phone.*

"A-agh. Mghmgh."

Something like a groan came from the duct taped mouth of the woman wearing office clothing.

Her tight skirt and suit were custom-made and looked quite expensive and she was currently hanging from the ceiling with her hands bound.

Naturally, Mai-san seemed to have had a reason for doing that, but…

"So you used a hidden village style of isolated VIP room? Hm? Did you use the Aburatori again? So is this a separate-style Package?"

"Separate-style? What's that?"

"Youkai – especially the deadly ones – are hard to capture or contact, right? So instead of getting several of them, you work at a single one from multiple angles to put together many different Packages. Sunekosuri, how much do you know about the Youkai known as an Aburatori?"

"W-well, just that it's a horrible one. Um, it's a relatively new deadly Youkai that appeared during the Meiji period, it sneaks into villages dressed as a farmer, and it secretly abducts and kills children, right?"

"Technically, it removes their organs, cooks them with a fish skewer, and takes the child's oil. Folklorists say it's a ghost story without the 'tradition of fear' since it has no moral to teach. Some say the Youkai itself is less frightening than the overly-suspicious group hysteria that's a lot like the witch hunts." She raised her index finger. "For example, the bodyguards at Ashinoko TV isolated the Aburatori's child-killing symbolism to create a murder

Package."

"Yes, I suppose."

"But that leaves the symbolism of 'sneaking in and abducting' unused. By using that excess portion for this hidden village Package, they can simultaneously operate multiple Packages with just the one Youkai. Those are called separate-style Packages. Right now, there seem to be three: the news broadcast, the assassins, and the hidden village."

"Y-you've been thinking about this. …But wouldn't they have to be really carefully assembled to avoid any competition that could send the Packages out of control?"

"Yes. At its core, it's a way of being economical. With its massive fighting force, Hyakki Yakou can capture multiple Youkai instead. That these people chose to use the separate-style tells us something about their strength, Sunekosuri-kun."

Just as I was about to give a sigh of understanding, some muffled protests came from the side.

Oh, right. That office woman is still hanging there.

Can I just assume she's Goudo Akira?

"Wait!! Why are you starting to strip off her clothes!?"

"Because it's necessary. But if all this commotion and creaking of ropes isn't enough to arouse suspicion, what kind of secret meetings do they normally hold here? Not SM shows, I hope."

Goudo Akira-san was quickly reduced to her underwear and stockings and she glared at us with hostility in her eyes.

Mai-san ignored it and roughly tore the duct tape from her mouth so it would hurt.

"You know why I'm letting you speak, right? I will ask one question and you have just one chance. You are a Hishigami man's legal adviser, aren't you? I had thought you were the type to give advice on criminal activity but avoid actually getting involved in it, but how about it? Are you truly the mastermind behind this or is there someone else beyond you? Please tell me."

“I won’t talk.”

“Oh, is that so?”

As she spoke, Mai-san pulled something from the bag she had placed on the tatami mats.

But it was not a depressing torture device like pliers, a saw, or a soldering iron.

“Huh? A marker?”

“With some exceptions, most specialized torture devices are too bulky to carry around. When infiltrating enemy territory, you can use something like this to get people to talk in a timely fashion.”

Mai-san removed the marker’s cap and approached Goudo Akira-san.

“Bring it on. I won’t tell you any- hyah. W-wait. Heh heh. What kind of torture is this!? Why are you drawing Xs all over me? Hee hee. What is the point of this scribbling!?”

There was a type of torture known as “tickling”, but I could not see anything here that was depressing enough to rupture the diaphragm used to breath. It really did look like Mai-san was simply scribbling on the woman.

“Yes, yes. If you can’t stand it anymore, feel free to spill the beans.”

“Fya ha ha! I-I won’t- I won’t give in to… hee hee!”

“By the way, Akira-chan, are you familiar with the iron maiden?”

“What?”

Goudo Akira-san had been twisting her body around to endure the marker, but the sudden mention of that dangerous term caused her to freeze in place as if someone had thrown cold water over her.

Mai-san continued regardless.

“As I’m sure you know, it’s the world’s most famous torture device. Incidentally, the most famous execution device is the guillotine☆ Well, well? Have you heard of it? …That look on your face makes me think you’re going to say it’s common knowledge in the West. So I guess you do know what the iron maiden is, right?”

“What does that have to do with-…”

“Something like a metal coffin with double doors is filled with sharp spikes and the victim is simply closed inside, so it’s easy to use. But since the spikes are positioned in just the right places to not hit any vitals, the suffering lasts good and long. That’s the legend left by that torture device, but I’m sure about half of it is just embellishment.”

With a squeak, Mai-san drew the final X on Goudo Akira-san’s bare side and she hummed to herself as she did so.

“But if you know where to stab, you don’t need that big, fancy device.”

“Eh? Wait. You don’t mean…”

The woman hanging from the ceiling slowly looked down at her own stomach.

She had several dozen suspicious X-marks drawn all over her body.

Meanwhile, Mai-san moved away, put the marker back in her bag, and pulled something else out instead.

Its silhouette resembled a handgun, but the power tool was larger and bulkier.

“Tah dah!! It’s the friend of anyone with a problem, the nail gun! You can use it for your home improvement projects and you can use it when you don’t have a gun on hand, but can you perhaps think of another use for it?”

“……………………………………………………………………………………

Goudo Akira-san twisted around enough to make the entire room creak, but it did nothing to change the fact that she was dangling in midair.

“I won’t take my time and slowly fire one nail at a time. I already know it won’t kill you, so I think I’ll go ahead and put all the nails in their marks before asking you again.”

“W-wait, wait!! Even if you do that, I-I won’t…!!”

“It’s no use now. I’m turning you into a human spiked bat no matter what you say. Even if you told me the truth right this instant. So just give up.”

“Ah…!! But…you…that makes no sense!!”

“I said right at the beginning that I was asking one question and you have just one chance. It’s your fault for not making good use of that chance.”

Some said the scariest thing in the world was someone whose thoughts you simply could not comprehend.

I was fairly certain Mai-san was only putting on an act to appear that way, but still.

“I can drag out the information I want once you’ve lost everything and once you’re covered in unnecessary injuries. Okay?”

She did not hesitate.

For this act, she showed a willingness to truly create a corpse here.

While still smiling, she pressed the end of the nail gun against Goudo Akira-san’s body. It was a bit above her stomach and below her voluminous chest where her ribs could be seen protruding a bit.

And Mai-san was not hesitating to smash that rib.

“I-I can’t overlook this any longer! Take this!!”

“Sunekosuri, why are you playing around at my feet? And completely useless help will probably only deepen her despair. Are you actually trying to help me?”

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!!!?”

There was nothing I could do, so I simply squeezed my eyes shut.

But then…

“Oh, what’s all this? Mai, could you end your eccentric behavior here?”

A new voice intruded on the scene.

It was a gentle male voice. I hesitantly opened my eyes and found a young man of about thirty who wore casual indigo blue Japanese-style clothing. Yes, a *young* man. He was surrounded by some unseen aura that prevented me from calling him anything else.

Mai-san narrowed her eyes as she turned toward him, but she kept the nail gun near Goudo Akira-san's body.

"Hishigami Kyou, third in line to the head family."

"You could call me your brother, you know? We are family, if you think about it reasonably."

The young man apparently named Hishigami Kyou gave a troubled move of his eyebrows and heavily sat in a wicker chair. He calmly extended a hand toward the opposite chair.

"Sit. If you want tea, make it yourself. We are brother and sister, so treating you like a guest would actually be rude."

"You sure are calm. If I wanted to-…"

"Yes, my death would probably be unavoidable. Unlike you, I do not possess any unreasonable strength. Whether I resisted or not, you could kill me if you tried. That is the fate of a person who lives in a reasonable world."

"…"

A chill seemed to fill the air and Mai-san sat in the opposite chair with a sulking look on her face and the nail gun still in her hand.

Eh? So, um…

"W-wait. I know we're not really one to talk, but…um, what about Goudo Akira-san who's still hanging there."

"Hm? She is my legal advisor who has been with me through thick and thin. She is also quite skilled. I would love to save her, but as I said, I live in a reasonable world. You can't expect me to pull off a dashing rescue like a superhero."

"…!!"

She no longer had duct tape over her mouth, but Goudo Akira-san seemed unable to speak.

Despite the young and beautiful woman hanging from the ceiling in her underwear between them, the brother and sister spoke as if they were alone.

There was no point in arguing whether the Hishigami men or Hishigami women were crazier. They all had a screw loose!

“Now, Mai. Do you know why I am here?”

“It doesn’t seem to be to save that woman or to give me any information.”

“Hishigami.”

Kyou cut in with that one word and continued despite being faced with Mai-san of all people.

“We are aware of the emergency news report saying that Hishigami Mai has died. A few reporters have even foolishly asked if she has any connection to me. Of course, that is not much of a problem. Hishigami is a popular family name in Japan…no, in the entire world. Saying *some unidentified person* was likely using the name will easily solve the problem.”

“…”

“But *giving that explanation is not reasonable.* Lying in front of the police or reporters is not something we Hishigami men do. It is easy, but I do not like doing it. Please do not cause us any more trouble. Do whatever it takes to ensure that, as it will have nothing to do with us. Do you understand?”

“This is the true essence of the Hishigami men, Sunekosuri.” Mai-san sounded utterly exasperated. “Reasonable this and reasonable that. They keep saying it over and over, but they’re actually the craziest of us all. They support a large portion of Japan’s economy and even control the production and supply of defense weaponry. They’re crazy and stand above everyone but still talk about what’s reasonable. If they altered what is reasonable and thus the tendencies of a vast majority of people in the country, they could easily start a war or a coup d’etat.”

“Well, if that’s the reason of the age, there isn’t much you can do about it, is there? Even if the country fell into decline and over half the population was lost, that would be the result of the reason they themselves desired. We are merely letting that trend carry us along. That is what you must do when you are a good person who wishes to maintain order.”

“And you feel you need us Hishigami women even if you hate us.

You want a breaker you can throw in case the giant system runs out of control.”

“Please stop that. If Hishigami siblings truly began to fight, it would reduce the world population to about five people. And that is not reasonable at all.”

Order and destruction.

These siblings existed on a scale that sounded straight out of Indian mythology.

“So how am I supposed to get the information I need to settle this without a fight like that? Should I turn that woman into a human spiked bat or should I hang you up in her place?”

“It doesn’t really matter to me, but how about I simply tell you?”

He spoke bluntly.

It sounded exactly like a brother giving his sister a message from their parents.

“You seem to have made a major enemy, Mai. Have you noticed the term Aburatori popping up around you a lot?”

“What about it?”

“Basically, someone is up to no good using an Aburatori. Mai, what is your job? Have you considered the possibility that you are viewed as an element that could destroy that plan of theirs?”

“I know nothing about this supposed plan. They’re the ones that attacked me.”

“The underworld has no police or trials. The existence of or lack of evidence does not matter. Your world punishes people even if they are simply suspicious, right? Are you sure you did not do anything to make a misunderstanding? Or did you do anything so unreasonable that they might decide to crush you before you became a problem?”

“…”

While still holding the dangerous nail gun, Mai-san appeared to think for a bit.

Her appearance was nothing to go by as she was a master of the poker face, but it looked like she was having trouble accepting something.

“So who is this person? For Hishigami to make an appearance like this, it must be someone from the economic world like you. Is it related to politics?”

“Yes, it is. If it’s someone like me, we can safely assume they have spread their influence there. If you think about it reasonably, anyway.”

“How can you say that when you’re involved with voting blocs, policy think tanks, and sponsoring big data to support elections? What, have I made an enemy of the prime minster or something?”

“*Higher than that.*”

Hishigami Kyou-san did not hesitate to make that unthinkable comment.

Eh? But what position is higher than the prime minster?

“In the east, it’s Akasaka. In the west, it’s Gion. Japanese politics are secretly controlled by a conductor group that is firmly split into two different factions. To them, the boundaries between political parties mean nothing. They control everything even remotely related to politics. Mai, I’m sure even you have heard the urban legends. Those rumors that sound as ridiculous as the nuclear shelter in Nagatachou Station.”

“You mean the Master of the Restaurant?”

As soon as she muttered those words, I could sense a strange chill seep into the room as if we had touched on something that was not to be mentioned. It was like she had rudely kicked down a small shrine of unknown origins.

“I don’t know how many are involved, but the Western Side is planning something with an Aburatori.”

“The Western Restaurant is planning something unreasonable?” Mai-san gave a confused frown. “That isn’t good. Come to think of it, I did go on a bit of a rampage in Kyoto’s Gion recently. I was investigating an incident related to a ‘monk’ and I ended up creating quite a few corpses.”

"And that is the Western Restaurant's headquarters. That would be why they're targeting you."

Kyou-san sounded exasperated.

"The East has been getting all excited with the world's tallest radio tower and their Edo-style revival campaign, so the West's small sort of 'nationalism' was already on edge. You poked at that hornet's nest at just the wrong time, Mai."

"The Edo-style revival campaign? Wait a sec. Isn't that just some VIP's hobby?"

"The fact that they have the power to make a national project of that scale out of a mere hobby has angered the Western Restaurant." Kyou-san shrugged. "At any rate, it is simply unreasonable for the true center of the government to rely on a criminal Package. They must be growing senile. Don't you think that is a problem?"

"What's this? Does this person happen to be an eyesore to the Hishigami men?"

"Of course not. We are perfectly reasonable, so we would never think of anything so dangerous."

The young man in casual Japanese-style clothing grinned while standing from the wicker chair.

"The individual from the Western Side is named Udou Itsuki. If you are interested, then feel free to pursue him. She must be planning to hold discussions with the international cabinet members because she just so happens to be in one of Hakone's Intellectual Villages."

"You aren't feeding me false information so I eliminate a political rival, are you?"

"Then make sure you investigate this properly ahead of time. And being manipulated like that is very unlike someone as unreasonable as you. As your brother, it would sadden me to see you like that. Much like seeing a hero from a movie fall into decline."

With that, Hishigami Kyou-san readily began to leave the room.

Eh? But what about Goudo Akira-san!?

“Kyou-san!! Um, wait… Please wait!!”

She must have thought he really was going to leave her because she frantically cried out.

“Hmm?”

“I…I…I…But…I…”

“Unfortunately, I cannot cover for you. Mai may indeed be an unreasonable person who does not care who she must get involved to reach her goal, but she does at least make a proper judgment about who she kills. You must have done something dirty that angered her and that is not reasonable. It simply goes beyond the power I wield.”

“But!! You are not allowed to step out of line, so I determined what you wanted and supported your prosperity in a way that did not sully you!! I set up a connection with the Western Side even if it meant dirtying my hands because I thought it would help you in the future! A-and the only reason you rose to third in line over the past few years is because-…!!”

“But I did not want any of that.”

Hishigami Kyou-san sounded troubled and that was enough for Goudo Akira-san to fall silent.

It was like watching someone finish a speech that had lasted several years only to find out the listener had not understood the language they were speaking.

“The line of succession does not matter. If my position is going to fall, then so be it. As long as that fall comes from sticking to reasonable actions, that is. In fact, it is odd for someone like me to be in third place in the first place. From a reasonable point of view, anyway. This is actually quite uncomfortable for me. Being placed outside the course I had planned for could even be called painful.”

“Ha…ha…”

“Setting up a connection with the Western Side? That is the opposite of how the Hishigami men operate. Listen. Connections between people are made when they are meant to be made. Trying to forcibly twist them into place will only create unwanted connections. The worst possible outcome is wishing you had met someone under different circumstances and you used that card on someone as large as this. There is likely no longer a way to form a reasonable and peaceful connection with the Western Side. Such a waste. That is the only way to view this.”

“Ha ha…ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.”

“But it would be heartless to simply abandon you here.”

“!!”

“I will go as far as to call the police. Thinking about this reasonably, the police will surely save you.”

This time, Goudo Akira-san’s face truly did turn pale.

Everyone here knew that basic rule did not apply here, but he simply did not want to step outside of that world.

Mai-san lightly waved around the nail gun while still sitting.

“Hey, Hishigami Kyou.”

“There is no reason to refer to your brother by his full name.”

“Does this inn’s ability to deal with trouble live up to its ‘high-class’ name? For example, does it dispose of inconvenient corpses and blood stains for you?”

“I know nothing of that unreasonable world.” Hishigami Kyou-san gave a light shrug. “But Akira-kun uses this place enough that she probably knows. So ask that unreasonable woman who so often did such awful things and yet showed no sign of getting caught.”

“…!!!???”

The way the muscles in her face tightened must have been enough of an answer.

Before I could even squeeze my eyes shut, nails started firing into her vitals with no regards to the x-marks.

Part 12

“This is suspicious.”

Once we left Hell Pass and returned to the rental car parked at the roadside station on the mountain road, Mai-san muttered those three words. It was already evening and the red of the mountain’s maple trees was quite beautiful, but it also reminded me of the bloody scenes I had witnessed recently.

“Wh-what is?”

“Everything that has happened so far. It all makes sense, but it lacks something. The overall picture is accurate, but I feel like a piece is missing. A piece that I can’t afford to overlook.”

“Um… Do you have anything to support that?”

“Nope. But the trick to a long life is to check over everything again when you feel like the grim reaper is staring at you. Of course, taking it too far gives you a persecution complex, so you have to have a sense for when to stop.”

Meanwhile, she stepped on the rental car’s gas pedal and left the roadside station. She drove along the road zigzagging down the mountain and I spoke while making sure I didn’t get carsick.

“Wh-where are we going?”

“Hakone contains a few different Intellectual Villages. The city grew as it repeatedly absorbed other cities, but it was later split apart again. To lose this unknown grim reaper, it would be best to head to another village.”

Her answer was not enough to eliminate my anxiety.

It was possible I had worded my question poorly

“What are you planning to do?”

“Sunekosuri, what is the name of the person behind all this?”

“Udou Itsuki, a member of the Western Restaurant, right?”

"*Are you sure?*"

"Eh?" I said without thinking.

Mai-san grinned while turning the steering wheel.

"Well, it doesn't matter if you hadn't noticed. For now, the problem is how to approach Udou Itsuki. He belongs to one of the Restaurants that control both the ruling party and the opposing party. Simply put, even using the word Restaurant in this way is a dangerous thing. We need to prepare if we're going to attack someone like this."

"B-but everything went so smoothly just now."

"That's just because Goudo Akira was incompetent. I doubt our next opponent will be so easy and I doubt the fortuneteller strategy will work either."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Udou Itsuki is powerful. His influence is thinly spread across the entire country, but at the same time, the Western Side only represents Japan. He can't control frameworks larger than that."

"W-wait… This has nothing to do with the G20 summit meeting, does it?'

"I see you've caught on." She grinned. "Let's abduct someone even more powerful and threaten Udou. I know. How about an Under-Secretary-General of the UN?"

Part 13

Tremble tremble!!

Tremble tremble tremble!!

“Sunekosuri, you don’t have to be so scared. If you keep shaking like that, I’ll use you as a massager. Do you want me to press you against all my naughty bits?”

“H-how am I supposed to stay calm!? A-a-a UN Under- what was it?”

“Under-Secretary-General. That’s two below the Secretary-General. But the five permanent member nations have the special privilege to choose the USGs. In the end, it’s a peaceful organization created by the victors of war.”

The curtain of night had already fallen over the entire area, so everything was dark. The rental car was lit by the light on the ceiling and Mai-san used a handheld device with shady modifications to search something online.

Surprisingly, simply searching news sites and the like was enough to find what national leaders and cabinet members were in Japan for the summit. They must have thought no one would misuse that information to cause some kind of incident.

Mai-san snapped her fingers.

“Good, good. There’s someone nearby we can use. Thomas Albert Jr. He’s American and an Under-Secretary-General. Let’s go for him☆”

“We can’t!! If we attack some VIP from the UN, they’ll send swat teams or Delta Force or some other group of muscular men in black masks to shoot us!!”

“They won’t do that, so don’t worry. And not even I’m going to try any point-blank range kung fu magic while wielding two handguns. It would be exhausting and just a general pain in the ass.”

“Eh? B-but you said you have business with a strictly-guarded UN Under-Secretary-General.”

“There’s a loophole. And in this business, it’s only polite to take notes of the characteristics and weakness of world leaders even if you don’t need anything with them. Even cutting out tabloid articles to take with you makes a difference. I doubt anything in there is true, but you can still find the truth from that twisted information.”

“But this is a VIP of the UN. What kind of opening could there be?”

“It’s an issue of different systems. Something might be legal in one country but illegal in another. That’s where we’ll make our strike.”

Part 14 (3rd person)

Either a first-string football player or a hitman.

That was usually people's first impression upon seeing Michael Lucas.

He was a muscular black man measuring over two meters tall. His arms were a surprising 49 centimeters around. When wearing sunglasses, he looked frightening enough that even back-alley gang members would move out of his way, but he did not actually want any of that in the slightest.

Athletics were not his strongpoint.

He did not like horror movies or tests of courage.

He was utterly bewildered as to why he had lasted so long in the bodyguard business, but every time he asked, the VIPs would laugh and say it was because of what a good person he was. For that reason, he had yet to solve the mystery.

"Honestly. What a pain."

His glove-like palm held a small handwritten note and he nervously checked it again and again.

Simply put, it was a prescription.

UN Under-Secretary-General Thomas Albert Jr., the one Michael had been hired to guard, had handed this secret note to this man he knew he could trust.

There was a tacit understanding that there could be no worries about the physical or mental state of anyone involved in politics or the administration, but this was a bit different than that.

This was about the differences between nations.

It was easier to get prescriptions drugs in America than in Japan. Doctors would prescribe painkillers and sleeping pills for people to take every day like they were Vitamin B, Vitamin C, or other supplements. They officially had migraines, insomnia, or some other ailment, but it had actually become a habit. They were taking them because they did not feel right without them, not because there was anything wrong with their bodies.

And some drugs that could be prescribed in great quantities with a single signature from one's attending physician in America were unobtainable in Japan because they were considered too potent. And just for reference, the lethal dose of drugs was based on the subject's body weight. When the size of the average Japanese person was compared to the average Westerner, that deviation in standards was not too surprising.

There was no point in arguing who was right. It was simply a difference between nations.

"But what am I supposed to do? Is this really right? I hope this will turn out okay. …They say when in Rome, do as the Romans do, so I don't think we should be making waves if we can avoid it."

Michael Lucas was muttering to himself because he could not contain it inside. He was generally a timid person. It was so bad that he had been momentarily tempted to go confess it all when he had seen a church within the city of Hakone. However, he had just barely restrained himself. An important G20 summit meeting was underway, so not letting the Under-Secretary-General focus could spread unnecessary chaos through the United States and even the entire world. Or so he told himself.

It was already night, so the hospital's outpatient reception desk and the pharmacy built adjacent to the hospital were both closed. Also, he was unlikely to find the painkiller on the note at those places.

Michael instead made his way to a large drugstore that stayed open late into the night.

However, the product in question was not stocked on its shelves. He walked straight up to the register of that store filled with bright fluorescent lights and he hesitantly spoke to the bored-looking clerk.

"Excuse me."

"Ee!? M-may I help you?"

"Don't worry. You can speak Japanese."

It really did depress Michael a little how scared the clerk was, but he did not let it show. This was always how it had been. Before entering junior high, he had already reached 180 centimeters. Not only had the neighborhood kids looked at him in fear, but their parents had as well.

The young clerk made his way into the back of the store and returned with a cardboard box big enough to hold a soccer ball. The side of the box had the logo of an online store familiar even in Michael’s home country.

Once the ban on selling drugs online had been lifted, the stores had quickly branched out into a number of services. This was one of those. Instead of having the package sent to one’s home, it could be picked up at a local store. When ordering athlete’s foot medication, hair growth medicine, erectile dysfunction medication, emergency contraceptives, and other products one might want a secret, this service left as few ties to the receiver as possible. Not even family members would know.

When ordering from a foreign company, the hurdles to reaching their products could become unclear.

“Um, this should be it. The product name is ‘pills’. Yeah, as usual, that’s a pretty broad category.”

“This is what you call an embarrassing errand. You should have picked up on that when I offered to pay with cash instead of a card.”

“O-oh, um! I was not trying to pry. That will be five thousand yen. That includes the tax. Um, hm… How do you say that in English?”

“I understood you.”

Michael handed over the money, took the box, and felt a pleasantly cool sensation on his glove-like palms. The box must have been stored in a refrigerator.

The large store’s exit seemed quite far away, but it did not actually take more than twenty seconds to reach it. After exiting the automatic glass door and stepping onto the parking lot, he finally let out a sigh.

“Should this really be so easy? Even cold and headache medicines are made by gathering just the drug components using a handmade centrifuge.”

“You’re right. But thanks to this, I managed to capture you.”

He did not catch even a glimpse of the speaker.

An instant later, his vision blurred, he fell to the side, and at the very, very end, dull pain spread through his head.

Part 15

Mai-san took a small cardboard box and a cell phone from the large black man collapsed in the drugstore parking lot.

Tremble tremble.

I did not particularly like the asphalt parking lot, but the pressure in my stomach made me forget all about that uncomfortableness.

“H-how… How did you pull that off so well?”

“Is it really that strange? It’s already night, so the hospital, pharmacies, and PO boxes are all closed. They can’t exactly have a bike courier carry it directly to the inn because of all the media presence. That leaves an online purchase shipped to a drugstore as the most likely option. They can arrive as soon as three hours after you make the click.”

“B-but this is a national chain. There are tons of the exact same chain in the city portion of Hakone.”

“Even with convenience stores on the same street, some will thrive and some will go under. With the summit meeting underway, a look at the security report will tell you where people gather. And they’re sure to have their package sent to the store that stands out the least and that is farthest away from the crowds.”

I glanced around the asphalt and my gaze stopped on the muscular bodyguard.

I want to believe I’m wrong, but…

“Why do you look so worried, Sunekosuri-chan?”

“Eh? W-well…”

“Don’t worry. Even I won’t kill people who I don’t have to. The biggest problem isn’t the people with flashy combat skills or great influence. It’s the honest citizen of a small town that everyone loves. Kill them without thinking and the people afflicted by the ‘kind noise’ will never leave you alone. I’d rather not deal with that.”

I followed Mai-san toward the rental car and she used the swiped cellphone to call someone.

“Hello, hello. Good evening. Yeah, a direct line is a wonderful thing. Oh, you’d be better off not tracing or recording the call. That would only be wrapping the noose around your own neck.”

“…”

“The bodyguard you sent out on a secret mission has failed. I have the package, so what will you do? I plan to deliver these painkillers you gulp down like mint tablets, so make sure your back door is unlocked.”

“…”

“If you’d rather I didn’t, that’s fine too. I’ll just take out the next person you send out. But how are you going to survive that migraine? You might be suffering all night long.”

With that said, Mai-san ended the call and dropped the phone to her feet. After crushing it underfoot, she winked at me.

“The negotiations are complete. Let’s go for a direct delivery☆”

Part 16

"What? How can you call this cloudy!? Look, the bright full moon is right-… No, wait a second. Don't tell me…!!"

"The Pon Poko Pon floats in the night sky."

"Y-you're kidding. That…that guy isn't the full moon!! That's…!?"

"A wonderful stomach that can be mistaken for a perfectly round moon. …I cut down evil to protect good! I am Samurai Pon Poko!!"

Mai-san and I made our way to Ennetsu Village, one of the several Intellectual Villages newly created from a piece of Hakone. The American UN Under-Secretary-General Thomas Albert Jr. was staying in the high-class inn there.

Thomas-san was a well-built old white man. He must have just taken a bath because he wore a yukata supplied by the inn and was watching a period drama on TV with a sake bottle in one hand. He might have been a Japanophile, so I hoped this crazy incident did not change his impression of the country too much.

Mai-san held the small cardboard box and her eyes opened wide when she glanced at the TV.

"Huh? They're showing Samurai Pon Poko here too? Personally, I prefer Kokkuri-san Conquers!! That's the one about the adventures of a fox, dog, and tanuki traveling around the country and reforming the world! The tanuki was especially nice."

"Mh. What's so great about a tanuki? Those fat Youkai just sit around drinking all the time."

"Heh he heh. Sunekosuri, are you jealous?"

"Jealous? Of what?"

"Chomp☆"

Bfohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?

She suddenly picked me up and then went straight for the face! Not the nose and not the jaw. She bit my entire protruding face!

"G-geh!! Cough cough!! Wh-what are you doing!?"

"You were just so cute I couldn't help but give you a stimulating kiss."

"I thought you were going to bite my entire face off! Like in a tomato ad!!"

I heard someone clear their throat and Thomas-san interrupted our conversation as if slipping a thin blade between us.

"Why are you here?"

"Here, we have a present for spoiled littler Junior. …But are you sure? These are a lot stronger than some illegal herbs."

"This is an issue of the system. These are treated like cough drops in my country."

"So what control system do you use?"

"What?"

"Which Western system for drawing out the power of the inhuman do you use? Rusalka? Nixie? I'm not a specialist in this, but I detect a feminine scent of death. But if you can't keep the spirit's fatalness from leaking out, you're not going to successfully harness their inhuman power. In fact, you'll end up losing your own life."

"Leannán Sídhe."

"Out of all the options, you had to choose the one that defaults to taking your life force in exchange for her ability. I can see why you need such harsh painkillers."

"But this is necessary. Three years ago, we sent a large number of container plant factories to central Africa as humanitarian aid. The large boxes were decorated with ribbons and had a message card attached. When combined with solar power, those plant factories could be harvested more than twenty times a year, so they should have resolved the rampant food shortages there. However, they are showing no sign of recovery due to an unexpected turn of events."

"A local criminal group took over and turned them into narcotics factories?"

"Fully-enclosed plant factories can be hidden inside or underground, so not even satellite photographs are any use. If they are not found immediately, the entire area's development could be set back thirty years. I need to locate them even if it means taking inspiration that exceeds the human realm. So…"

In a country where prescriptions for large amounts of drugs were normal, even severe symptoms could be hidden. In that case, the price of protecting something had likely left his body in a terrible state.

"What did you gain from going that far?"

"My dream, I suppose. I did reach that dream, but I had lost everything else by the time I did."

Mai-san gave a bored sigh, brushed a hand through her bangs, and spat out an annoyed word.

"Caladrius."

"What?"

"That is the name of a German medical society. They are researching the use of a fairy by the same name that looks like a small bird. It heals the patient by absorbing the illness filling their body, which makes it the natural enemy of *a certain gloomy bastard I know*. Use your connections to their fullest to look into it. If you're lucky, you might be able to turn your life around."

The old man in a yukata fell silent for a while.

But finally…

"Fine then. I will forgive your impoliteness to make us even. I saw nothing tonight."

"Why thank you."

"But your goal wasn't to interfere in an old man's business, was it? Why are you even here?"

Mai-san gave a quick shrug.

"Sorry, but I have no interest in you yourself. But that also means I won't harm you. I didn't kill the macho bodyguard you sent out on an errand either. I hope you can accept that on good faith."

"Then…"

"Shh. You'll know soon enough. Although you might be better off not knowing."

Just as she pressed her index finger against her lips, the room's phone emitted a simple ring. Thomas-san reached for the receiver out of habit, but she snatched it before he could.

"Hi there. Are you starting to sweat yet? Has it been over a decade since you've felt this way?"

"Who would go that far? This is a UN representative and someone supported by the United States. Do you have any idea how much a single scratch on him could harm our national interests? This could even affect our national security."

"And that's why you called directly instead of using an agent or negotiator. Isn't that right, Udou Itsuki of the Western Restaurant that runs Japan? I'm thankful you were willing to spare some time for a single freelance agent who lurks in the back alleys."

"Let us get to the issue at hand."

"I want to know the whole picture. To be blunt, I hadn't touched on anything related to the criminal plan using an Aburatori Package, so why did you try to take my life by making that false news report a reality?"

"Why do I have to answer you?"

"Are you sure you should be saying that? You assembled that in the separate-style, didn't you?"

"Well…"

"Have you forgotten? The separate-style alters the breakup of a single Youkai's symbolism to run multiple Packages at the same time. It's a convenient system that lets you concentrate your efforts and immediately cut off the supply of power if someone betrays you, but it also means every Package is linked back to that single core."

"…"

"I've already come into contact with a few paranormal incidents related to your Aburatori, so I have the opening needed to reach that core. I don't know what you're trying to do, but if you keep this up, I'll go destroy the core."

Straining my ears was enough to just barely hear a sigh come from the phone.

"What do you know about the Aburatori?"

"It is a deadly variety that specializes in killing children," replied Mai-san. "It's a new one that appeared in the mountain villages of Tohoku during the Meiji period. It sneaks in dressed as a farmer, secretly abducts the village's children, takes out their organs, and cooks them to take the oil. It's an easy one to use for offensive Packages, but it must be hard to control."

"Pathetic. Did you study using children's picture books?"

This may have been Udou Itsuki's true character.

Or perhaps he put on an act of extreme mental superiority to eliminate his anxiety.

"The greatest trait of the Aburatori is its relative lack of a historical background," said the voice on the phone. "Youkai can be called paranormal phenomena with wills of their own that have been sharply honed after a natural selection process lasting hundreds or even thousands of years. Some of them are even referred to as gods that fell into ruin after no one worshiped them. But…"

"The Aburatori is a newcomer that suddenly appeared during the Meiji period. In only just over a century, it has transformed into a major Youkai standing alongside the all-stars. Almost as if it took the stairs three at a time. Is that what you focused on?"

"Our hope was to *speed up the process at which legends mature*," bluntly explained Udou Itsuki. "How much can the modern Japanese tell you about the gods? Can they name even ten gods from Japanese mythology off the top of their heads? And I mean without checking the internet and acting like they knew it."

"Can't we let the history textbooks take care of that?"

"Religion is untouchable. That is the unwritten rule of this nation. And yet they still pray when they're having trouble and feel a certain spirituality in all things. …It's all too vague. They call themselves atheists, yet they have a general fear of areas said to have spiritual or mystical power. And at the same time, they do not follow any strict doctrines or traditions. Their belief is fragile. That is why the threat of criminal Packages is so rampant. This country is far too powerless when it comes to the supernatural. Packages may be the only threat at the moment, but in the not-too-distant future *a much larger calamity* will swallow up the country because of this.”

That was why he wanted “something” to renew the country’s view of religion.

That was why he had focused on the Aburatori that had quickly reached the level of the more historical Youkai.

That was why he had tried to use such a deadly being that brought nothing but fear and death.

“Ha ha!!”

And yet Mai-san gave a laugh as if mocking a just cause.

“You wanted a religious boost for the imprudent younger generation? Don’t make me laugh. What you’re doing is no different from using the name of a famous noble to have an easier time catching people in a scam. What exactly are you trying to artificially increase and spread throughout the country? It’s probably some nasty ideology that would never spread under normal circumstances. Something that would create an era of insanity but send a massive fortune your way.”

“Say whatever you want. We…”

“Also, *you aren’t really thinking about Japan in all this, are you?*”

It seemed like all sound had vanished from the world.

That was just how much Mai-san’s words had torn into the situation.

“It is true Japan is a crazy enough country for videos of ghosts and spiritual entertainers to have real influence, but that doesn’t mean everyone in the country has a complex about the occult. Even if they don’t know much about Shinto or Buddhism, *they’re still proud just knowing those things have a history of more than a millennium.* This country doesn’t need the kind of system you’re talking about. No matter how much effort you put into making this ‘new product’, no one is going to give it a second glance.”

“…”

“In that case, are you perhaps focused on exporting the paranormal? Did someone from the G20 come to make business negotiations with you here in Hakone? Some of them are probably very interested in that kind of thing.”

She glanced toward the corner of the room where the UN Under-Secretary-General sat in a legless chair.

“For example, America. Their country was founded a mere three hundred years ago. They may be a religious nation that uses the Bible during trials and the president’s oath of office, but they also top the world when it comes to handgun suicides. They wouldn’t want that transforming into random shootings or group suicides. What is it that is shaking their citizens’ hearts? How can they stop it? If they only had a system to forcibly mature *a solid historical background to tell them everything would be fine,* they could stop that shaking of their hearts. It seems to me that would establish the needed supply and demand to export there.”

“Ending the chaos in America is important for our own country as well. No matter what excuses people make, it is a fact that we are relying on them. It is a problem when your partner trips in a three-legged race, isn’t it? So to help them…”

“How many people have died for this? There must have been quite a few failed test runs before you successfully won over what is an especially horrid Youkai even among the deadly ones. And where were those lost lives born?”

“You have no right to say that after laying a hand on your own brethren with a smile on your face!! We are doing everything we can to solve these problems while focusing five to ten years down the line. We are focusing on the future! We are nothing like a Hishigami that kills people without reason for her present convenience!! Do you think we sacrificed our own nation’s citizens because we wanted to!?”

“I hope your fellow Japanese citizens will accept your excuse. What will it be? We were afraid our allied nation in the three-legged race would betray us, so we exported a Package with a backdoor to create an environment where we have a way of manipulating the public opinion of the American people?”

"Wh-… You!?"

"Ha ha ha. You want to know why I suddenly brought up a backdoor? *Because I know you would do that.* This isn't about evidence to submit for a police investigation or trial. We both live in a world where no proof is needed. But are you sure that's a good idea? If this is found out, both Japan and America will string you up like a bat in a picture book. You'll probably be kicked out of the Western Restaurant too."

"This is why I wanted nothing to do with a wild beast like you."

That comment sounded like a groan and like a curse.

The low voice seemed to ooze out of the phone and into the room.

"No matter how much the information is restricted or cut off, you fill in the gaps with *incomprehensible logic that only makes sense to you*. You say what you would have done, but that's enough to find the right answer and you attack at that weak point! Media control and destruction of evidence is powerless against a madwoman's inspiration!!"

"Why thank you. My job doesn't give me enough time to slowly search through a massive amount of information. In the end, it's the 'nose of the beast' that finds the answer. And if you can't believe that, you probably won't last long."

Mai-san's expression remained unchanged.

She maintained a relaxed smile from beginning to end.

"More importantly, you have this backwards. You were the one that attacked first with that emergency news report. You can try to hit me as much as you want, but don't be so selfish as to beg me not to hit back."

"What are you talking about? We know that you were *investigating us*!"

"…"

"And either way, you would have picked up on the project somewhere once it began to advance. As I said, we were looking to the future. It could not hurt to take you out early. Even if the news method failed, we will definitely kill-…"

"Sigh."

It was as if a switch had suddenly been thrown.

Mai-san gave an icy sigh. It contained the same overwhelming disappointment as a long-married couple rejecting all their nostalgic memories and resolving themselves to break up.

"That's enough. I understand most of it now. I had my suspicions, but that settled it. Sorry about interrupting your excitement, but I have no more business with you."

"What!?"

"I mean, you're supposed to be Udou Itsuki, right? You belong to the Master of the Restaurant that controls Japan from Akasaka in the east and Gion in the west. …If that was really who you were, you would not be so sloppy. You may be under the impression you are speaking logically, but you are clearly speaking from emotion. And that got the better of you."

She sounded listless.

Her voice contained no hint of respect or caution.

"And you have completely mistaken where the problem lies. The biggest threat is not Hishigami Mai, the lone wolf. It's the UN Under-Secretary-General listening in from the side, right? He's an American citizen, so he's the last person you want learning you're exporting a Package with a backdoor installed. If you had any sense, your first priority would be figuring out how to naturally eliminate a well-known individual. Of course, pulling off a natural assassination swiftly and quietly at this point would be impossible for almost anyone but a Hishigami woman."

For a while, no response came from the phone.

However, I could hear an odd sound that was not quite moaning and not quite muttering to oneself.

Mai-san continued while sounding truly fed up with all of this.

"That's enough to leave your mind blank? …That's it. I get it, so just transfer me to your boss. Talking with a little boy like you isn't going to get me anywhere."

“Th-there is no one higher than me! Ha ha. You seem to have misread that at least. Your cleverness seems to have crossed a line and turned into a victim complex!! In other words…!!”

“And Udou Itsuki may have a lot of ‘power’, but that’s in reference to the political power balance. Direct confrontations using the occult are outside his field of expertise. The brain of the operation must be somewhere near you. …When did you realize they were simply flattering you? They lured you past the point of no return and then used you as a puppet, didn’t they? *‘They’ being the true leader and brains of the operation who respectfully bows down to you*.”

“Wh-what?”

“Wait. Did you seriously not catch on? Wow. I did *not* expect that level of incompetence. But in that case… Hmm. You would have to know that at least, right? But then, if you really are that incompetent…it’s possible.”

“What!? What are you hiding!?”

“Well,” said Mai-san with a thin smile. “Are you aware you’re only Udou Itsuki’s body double?”

“What?”

This time, the phone truly did grow silent as if it had been swallowed up by a void.

After several seconds, something finally happened.

However, it was not Udou Itsuki speaking.

It was a loud gunshot and the sound of something heavy collapsing to the ground.

“This is hopeless.”

After a pause, I heard a young female voice that was clearly different from the previous man.

Who is this?

“Completely hopeless. I thought an idiot would be easier to control, but they end up tripping you up when they’re that stupid. In a way, this was a good lesson.”

“Oh, so are you the brains? But why did you work with the body double? You could have dealt with the real Udou Itsuki.”

“Are you an idiot too? What's wrong with this country? The real one is too strictly guarded to get anywhere close. But the body double is given a portion of the Restaurant’s authority so no one can tell they aren’t the real one and that portion was enough for me.”

“You mean for assembling the Aburatori Packages?”

“You really are an idiot. Or am I just too brilliant? The Aburatori was nothing more than bait to lure in the body double.”

“Yeah, despite claiming to *look to the future*, everything he said was way off the mark. Almost like someone was guiding him.”

“I always thought the biggest villain of Snow White was the mirror of truth. Much like an Ungaikyou,” said the annoyed voice. “By the way, my target is you, Hishigami Mai.”

“I don’t recall doing anything to leave a grudge.”

“I’m not going to kill anyone for something like that. Are you stupid?”

“Then why?”

“Because this is a small industry. I can tell that we would collide somewhere around the project after the project after my next if I do not take care of you now. And so I will kill you for the sake of the future. Clever, isn’t it?”

She was not killing Mai-san because she had gotten in her way.

She was killing her because she would probably get in her way eventually.

And to do so, she was willing to deceive anyone and drag anyone into this. Succeeding would make her a murderer and failing would make her a murder victim. She had flung herself into that hopeless abyss for what might be an imagined dream.

“Oh, so pretty much what I usually do,” replied Mai-san.

“Please do not compare me to an idiot like you. You only just thought that up, didn’t you?”

They sounded like they were simply chatting.

To Mai-san, that may have been fairly accurate. But this person was intent on killing Mai-san for her own safety, so how did she see the ferocious Hishigami Mai who would press onwards and break through any and all barriers?

The two agents continued on while paying me no heed.

“But my plan will continue even if this idiot of a body double is dead. Don’t think you will survive to see the dawn.”

I heard a strange sound resembling a laugh.

It came from Mai-san’s throat.

“No, no. That isn’t enough.”

“What? Don’t tell me you’re so stupid you think you’ll awaken to some special power if you’re cornered. Approaching the truth of the situation isn’t going to change anything. You are always being chased within this industry and I will slip through those gaps to kill you. Learning the truth only resolves the problem in cheap mysteries. That won’t work in reality.”

“Hah hah. I think I’ll throw those words right back at you☆”

Mai-san immediately replied in an obviously mocking tone.

One of her most frightening traits was her tendency to grow disrespectful instead of shouting angrily.

“In this world, *whatever happens happens* . You don’t say that things happen no matter what. You say that whatever happens happens. Do you get the difference? One of them includes a human will trying to change it and the other does not.”

Her voice was icily cold and yet she continued to give a smile of true enjoyment.

“You seem to be trying to hammer down the tallest nail as a logical way of ensuring your victory, but in my experience, logic backs off if you truly, truly force your desired result through. That’s why your emergency news didn’t reach me despite supposedly being a surefire method. You could also call that the essence of the Hishigami women. And afterwards, the people around us clean everything up. The people who realize the disaster would reach them as well if they did not contain it will automatically head in and clean up after us."

"I see. And are you saying their numbers and influence is greater than that of the people I have set in motion? Are you viewing this as an election that counts the *negative votes* of fear and violence?"

"You don't stand a chance if you think this will turn into anything like a proper election. My method is to smash the ballot box and stuff in billions of forged votes to turn everything my way."

She seemed to be utterly, utterly enjoying herself.

Her expression was filled with the hostility of a beast tormenting its captured prey.

But at the same time, the person on the phone may have had the exact same expression.

"You didn't make it that far," said Mai-san. "You stayed inside the framework and gathered logical violence that can be understood in a normal sense. That's too bad. Things are a lot easier if you break free of that framework and it isn't often I see someone crawl their way up this high in our industry. It really boggles the mind why people become slaves to the rules here despite having fallen into these back alleys of the world because they couldn't stand following the rules."

"I tried to hear you out, but that's nothing but the logic of a fool. Are you perhaps the kind of person who thinks wars can be won by trying harder? If so, that's pretty sad. Real fights to the death are decided by numbers. If you could raise an individual's value so easily, any of the six or seven billion people on the earth could become a historical emperor. And the human race would have been wiped out a long time ago."

When both sides spoke with no intention of gaining mutual understanding, could it really be called a conversation?

They both produced an avalanche of words to crush the other and they were both just about equal. It felt like proof that they were standing on the same field.

And yet I was unsure how many people or even Youkai could stand up to this monster without being "swallowed up".

“While we’re at it, how about giving me your name?” asked Mai-san. “That would make this more exciting.”

“Are you stupid? I’m going to lie in wait and kill you instead.”

The call ended there.

It ended as easily as a phone call between friends who called each other all the time.

Mai-san shrugged and tossed the receiver onto the landline’s hook.

“Let’s go, Sunekosuri. From here on, it’s a race against time.”

“Eh? Eh? Do you mean you’re going to fight that agent one-on-one?”

My honest question brought a troubled look to her face.

It seemed to say “Oh, I found an actual idiot.”

“No. That is definitely not going to happen.”

Part 17

After leaving the fancy inn and returning to the rental car, Mai-san said the following.

“The enemy never gave her name and she sealed the lips of the one connection we had: Udou Itsuki…or his body double, I guess. It’s easy to focus on how she kept talking about going on the attack, but she was definitely making sure to get rid of any information we could use to track her down. If we don’t settle this before she can escape, we’ll always be in danger of attack.”

“Th-then why was she acting so belligerent?”

“So she could escape to safety while I went on the defensive. The most obvious example was ‘Don’t think you will survive to see the dawn.’ Someone who was actually afraid would probably hole up in a building, seal up the windows and doors, and wait until dawn. Meanwhile, she would have vanished and could wait until a month or year down the line to kill them. But I’m not going along with that.”

The way these people always had a secret plan or two behind what they said made my head spin.

I felt exhausted, but my only choice was to ask a question.

“What are you going to do now?”

“To successfully vanish, she’ll be rushing around to destroy any hint that could lead back to her. In that case, we can run into her by getting to one of those hints ahead of her. That’s where we can kill her.”

This was a race against time. To arrive ahead of her, we would need to get moving faster than her. It would be too late by the time she had destroyed all of the evidence.

And once again, these people worked on the assumption that they would kill their opponent. I just couldn’t keep up.

“Anyway, the biggest and most obvious hint would be the Aburatori. If she directly assembled the Package, the idiosyncrasies and traits of the assembly could give away her personal information. As she said, this is a small industry. She'd definitely want to destroy that if she's planning to vanish here."

"I can't quite picture the situation."

"She put together a separate-style Package. That means removing the central Youkai will destroy all of the Packages it was used for. So if you wanted to completely destroy everything as quickly as possible, what would you do?"

"You mean use some kind of ridiculous technique to kill a deadly Youkai that can't be killed even if you stab or shoot it?"

"Anyone in this business should be able to kill a Youkai."

You make that sound so easy.

Just so you know, I'm a canine Youkai myself! Tremble tremble!!

"In that case, the issue is where the Aburatori is located. She was probably tricking the body double to keep this whole thing secret and she can't leave such a dangerous Youkai out in the open. It's probably locked up somewhere or kept in a state similar to hibernation."

"Are you saying there's a secret base or something hidden in Hakone?"

"That would actually stand out too much." Mai-san sliced my idea in two. "When smuggling drugs, you can slip them into the bag of an unsuspecting tourist. Even if the drugs are discovered, you can still escape. That's how a professional treats anything truly dangerous. I'd say the Aburatori was secretly thrown in the attic or basement of some normal person who has no connection to the occult."

"B-but if she's going to swiftly destroy that evidence…"

"Look at this."

Mai-san turned her handheld device toward me.

It displayed an article from an online news site.

"Mysterious fires in the new urban region of Hakone. Three homes completely destroyed. Gasoline residue was discovered on the exterior walls, so the police are investigating it as arson."

“Very unnatural. These timely fires are almost asking me to investigate them. And while I’m digging through empty rubble, she’ll be leisurely finishing off the Aburatori.”

“That’s why she did this? Y-you have to be joking!! The people who lived their lost their homes and some might have died!!”

“We can discuss morality later. To look at this another way, she thinks I’ll outdo her if she doesn’t go this far. That means our target must be somewhere pretty obvious. Somewhere that would stand from just a glance at the map.”

As she spoke, Mai-san opened her device’s map service. She also called up the locations of the fires in the residential district of Hakone’s city area.

It looked like that area dealt more in selling ready-made homes than renting out apartments.

“Sunekosuri, what stands out most to you?”

“E-eh? W-well, the entire place is laid out neatly like a chocolate bar, but I guess somewhere with an unnatural amount of land would stand out most. For example…”

“Oh, but no choosing the parks. If the place has no clear owner, you can’t accuse the owner if something goes wrong. In other words, it has to be a privately owned building.”

“Th-then here maybe?”

I casually pointed my front paw at a building.

“Um, Green Leaves Home? A nursing and welfare facility? Eh?”

“In other words, an old folks home. It was built half a year ago, so it’s almost brand new. I don’t know when the Aburatori decoy project started, but someone could have dug a space under the floor during construction and created a secret space not even the owner knows about. In other words, she could have done whatever she wanted.”

“So the person behind all this will be going there? To destroy the evidence by killing the Aburatori? B-but then…”

“Right.” Mai-san cheerfully nodded. “Let’s stake the place out to see what she does. Once we know what methods she uses, killing her will be easy."

For an instant, my brain refused to understand what she meant.

Eh?

You mean…um…what you're saying is… To sum it up…!!

"W-w-w-wait! I don't know who this enemy is, but she's coming to this facility if we don't do anything, right!?"

"That's right."

"She dumped gasoline on and burned down innocent people's houses just to throw us off her trail! Can she really kill this hidden Aburatori with a single attack? Because…because if she gets into a large-scale battle with it, what will happen to the old men and women staying there!?"

"It doesn't matter if they get caught up in this. Our enemy doesn't have time either, so she isn't going to considerately sneak in or anything. She'll probably pretend to be a home invader and go around killing people. If she steals some random bankbooks and seals, the police will be fooled. And if she later withdraws some money and exchanges it overseas, they'll think it was the work of a foreign group."

That's not the point.

That's not what I'm talking about!

You don't get it at all!!

"If you know that, how can you suggest we just watch!?"

"It's not like I'm killing them myself."

"Those old men and women are completely innocent!! Are you just going to sit idly by while they're killed!?"

"If I don't, I won't know what the enemy can do."

I distinctly felt my mind shake.

Why couldn't she understand something that anyone should know without being told?

And why was someone like that in a position where she held in her hands the lives of everyone in that facility?

“Um, Sunekosuri. It goes without saying, but I didn’t enter this world because I wanted to be some righteous hero. Did you really think I wouldn’t get civilians involved? What about that UN Under-Secretary-General? Was he a villain?”

“…”

“You can think what you want, but I don’t follow those rules. I take the actions necessary for a certain victory and sometimes that process will just so happen save civilian lives. However, that doesn’t have enough value to leave the path of certain victory.”

Ahh…

Most likely, she was overwhelmingly right. In this small industry at least. Idealism meant nothing here. You would never win, you would never survive, and you would never stop having everything taken from you. I had known that. Even my wife had suddenly vanished one day and I hadn’t found her no matter where I looked. I didn’t think something so unreasonable could be explained away while sticking to idealistic ideas. That was why I had entered a dangerous organization like Hyakki Yakou in the first place. I had been taught all this by the very thing that had brought me here.

But…

Even so…

“To hell with that, you damn roach. Do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

A painful silence fell over the rental car.

I had said something decisive.

I understood that and because I understood it, I opened my mouth again.

“Do you think you’ll end up on the top of the world if you act like some kind of superhuman and look down on everyone like that? You’re taking the world too lightly. Your position doesn’t rise just because you look down on someone else. You haven’t gained anything.”

“Sunekosuri.”

“Are you afraid of putting in any actual work? Are you afraid of having a clear loss thrust in your face if you take on an actual challenge like protecting those old men and women but fail? Is that why you don’t even try and minimize your losses!? If so, you’re just laughable. You aren’t protecting anything. Not one thing!! You let the numbers mislead you while you abandon what matters most!!”

“Sunekosuri.”

I didn’t know if it was the reflection of the moonlight entering through the dark car’s window or if it was something else, but definite light filled her two eyes as she silently looked at me.

“You can pick a fight with me here if you want, but Hakone is a battlefield now. The rule about Youkai not dying doesn’t apply here. …Are you sure you understand that? You aren’t thinking some mysterious power is going to neatly settle everything in the end, are you?”

“…”

“You may feel like god is on your side right now and you might mistakenly think a righteous power will reside within you because you made the right decision, but that’s nothing but *kind noise*. If you continue on like this, you’ll find yourself surrounded by enemies. You’ll turn around, but you won’t find anyone there and no one will give you any help. The source of your power is a hollow delusion. Do you understand that?”

“I do.”

I was a Sunekosuri.

I had no cruel power to kill people like a Yuki Onna or Shichinin Misaki. I looked like a small dog and all I did was rub up against the shins of passing travelers. I knew just how dangerous it was for such a tiny and powerless Youkai to head out alone.

“But I am standing here. Whether by coincidence or inevitability, I am here now. No matter how weak or puny I might be, I can influence the overall situation now that I’m standing on the stage. That possibility remains, so the rest is my problem. You have no right to tell me what to do!!”

“Is that so? Well, if you do understand, I won’t stop you.”

Mai-san rolled down the passenger side window. There was nothing more to say, so I leaned out the window and entered the Hakone night.

I was certain she was not as bad a person as she claimed to be.

If she was truly living a life free of bonds like this mysterious enemy of ours, she would have no reason to choose her targets so carefully. While disguising it as a failed unexploded ordnance recovery or a sudden volcanic eruption, she could have blown away the enemy along with the entire city of Hakone with no concern for the civilians or G20 leaders. It sounded absurd, but with her power and skill, it would have been a piece of cake.

But she did not do that.

No matter what anyone said and even if she mocked the idea herself, she drew a line between who she would kill and who she would not.

But she had not noticed that fact herself. And right now, she was trying to crush that small bud underfoot without every noticing it was there.

Even if it was temporary and forced on me by my higher ups, I was her partner.

I could not allow her to crush that small bud. And to do that, I had to protect the old men and women of the old folks home from our enemy!

Part 18

I could not rely on the great power of Hishigami Mai.

I had to fight someone of equal or greater power on my own.

The situation was hopeless.

In fact, my specs were no different from a small dog's, so even arriving at the residential area in question would be difficult. I approached a truck waiting at a light in the dark city, made a few failed jumps, and finally gathered all my effort and willpower to climb up onto the back of the truck.

On the way, I was nearly taken in a completely different direction, but I moved to different trucks a few times before finally reaching my destination.

I was met by such silence that it felt like the world had been destroyed.

The night was pitch black.

My vision blurred and it was likely due to more than just a Youkai's dislike of modern cities. There was some unknown presence here and it was on a level to instill fear even in a Youkai like me.

Even this late at night, it was strange to find no lights whatsoever. I felt the same sharp aura as when the electricity was cut off before a SWAT team barged in on a criminal barricaded in a building. Had the enemy already arrived? Would I really make it in time?

For the time being, I ran along the asphalt road to reach the Green Leaves Home.

The grounds were smaller than a school's. They were closer to the size of a kindergarten. The well-maintained lawn contained a few pieces of playground equipment and the sort of grill set found at campsites. They may have been for when the residents' grandchildren visited.

A quick look around showed no signs of broken windows or doors.

Deciding I had arrived first, I rang the front doorbell. More specifically, I began jumping again.

Kh… Hitting the button with my front paw is surprisingly hard!!

After a while, a few lights came on inside the building and slippered footsteps approached the door.

When the door opened, a short old woman stepped out.

“Oh? What do you want at this hour, little Youkai?”

“I am…”

I just about named myself, but quickly realized something.

What would I gain by identifying myself as a powerless Sunekosuri?

I rethought my plan and gave a meaningless snort.

“I am a Youkai that predicts the future.”

“Oh, my.”

“A tornado is coming! A huge disaster is coming! In just a few minutes, it will pass through here. If you understand, then please wake everyone and evacuate. A rectangular portion of the lawn has been cut out and there’s an underground space there, right? That should work as a tornado shelter.”

“Oh, my, my. That is a problem. We need to tell the neighbors too.”

“Hurry!! I’ll go tell the neighbors!!”

When I urged her on, she looked troubled but still moved back inside the facility. Despite the late hour, the thirty to fifty old folks obeyed my instructions. It may have been their age that let them trust the words of a Youkai like that.

“Hurry! I don’t know if it’s a storehouse or what, but there should be a door in the yard leading underground. Please head there!”

“Oh? Aren’t you a Sunekosu-…”

“Hurry, hurry!! The tornado will be here soon. Woof woof!!”

One of the old men just about saw through my lie, but I silenced him with pure momentum. Right now, I was an ominous canine

Youkai that predicted disasters.

After making sure they had all made their way below the yard, the previous old woman began to close the door from the inside, but she stopped for a moment.

“What about you? There’s a storm coming, isn’t there?”

“A tornado is coming, but don’t worry. I may not look it, but I am a Youkai and I still have work to do. I need to inform as many people in the neighborhood as I can.”

“Okay, but come back here if it gets dangerous. Just because you’re a tough Youkai doesn’t mean we can force all our pain onto you.”

I said I would and she finally closed the door.

Now, then.

I pictured the general layout of the old folks home and hurried around to check with my own eyes. There was a rectangular concrete building, a tank of what was likely town gas out back, swings and a slide in the large yard, and the grill set. Was there anything I could use as a weapon or otherwise? There would be blades in the kitchen, a fire extinguisher in the entranceway, and a tool box I couldn’t find one. There was probably a storage closet or something somewhere, though. After looking around a few times, I found the gardening tools: agrochemicals, plastic rope, and steel stakes.

I would do everything I could and I ran around making my preparations.

The enemy would arrive eventually and she would kill all witnesses even if there were a hundred or even a thousand of them. Those elderly people could not escape on foot in the middle of the night, so intercepting the enemy here was the only option.

And meanwhile the only person who has an actual chance of pulling that off is-…

Just as that thought entered my mind, something happened in just an instant.

The sound of destruction was simply overwhelming and it took me a while to realize what had happened.

I had been standing on all fours in the large yard, but my vision began spinning around and around. Everything transformed into a collection of meaningless flowing lines. My body was in midair and even the cement blocks surrounding the yard and the ground itself had been blown away by a massive strike on the level of a plane crash. By the time I realized all that, my thoughts finally caught up.

I had been knocked into the air by something frightening.

It was a giant arm measuring several dozen meters long. It looked like it was made from armor panels and thick leather held together with glue. A scooping upper cut had torn through the cement blocks and the ground to mercilessly strike me.

That was all there was to the attack, but I shot across the grounds of the old folks home and mercilessly slammed into the building's wall. The stones that flew along with me broke through the windows and even the wall.

"G-gah!? Gbbh. Bebhh!!"

I can't…breathe!!

My own blood…is blocking my throat!!

"Cough….cough cough!! Pant pant!!"

I somehow managed to cough up the blood and secure a path for air, but my head was still shaken. I was a Youkai and thus wouldn't be killed even if I was stabbed or shot, so what was this? I felt the pain of having my ribs squeezed to their limit and having every single organ crushed. I was undoubtedly approaching death.

By the time I noticed the sound of scraping metal, the giant arm had vanished.

In its place, someone stepped over the smashed cement blocks and into the yard.

It was a girl who looked about high school age and who wore a showy yellow sailor uniform. I did not know if any school actually used that uniform, but there was another more important issue. *Simply meeting this kind of person would mean death*, so was it even possible for her to have a normal school life?

She gave me an utterly scornful look as I unsteadily tried to stand.

“Don’t tell me you actually thought you’d gotten here ahead of the professional agent and that I just so happened to attack just as you finished your pathetic preparations. If so, you’re not very bright. Not very bright at all. Of course that isn’t what happened.”

As she approached, I detected a sweet juicy aroma similar to peaches. The kind smell seemed so out of place in the otherwise nightmarish scene that I felt like my senses had been thrown out of whack.

“I’m a freelance agent, you know? I make my through this world without the help of an organization and I’ve survived this long. Did you really think you were faster than someone like that? It was the opposite. The complete opposite. I had already arrived and I was monitoring you to judge your strength. That’s what happened. You may be stupid, but I assume you get it now.”

“…”

“Now, here’s a question for you. If I went to the trouble of judging your strength, why did I just make a blatant head-on attack? The answer is because I judged you were nothing worth fearing!!”

With a metallic sound, her slender right arm transformed from fingertip to shoulder. It was now a mass of steel and leather held together with glue. It almost looked like old Japanese armor.

That was the identity of the previous attack. It was a transforming suit of armor.

But as soon as I thought that, the truth far outdid my imagination.

“The Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach. That is the name of the artificial Youkai I created. In other words, this is my Shikigami. Now, what legend do you think I based this on?”

The Scarlet Peach.

A gentle and sweet aroma filled the air.

I shuddered and all of my fur stood on end.

It can’t be…

I thought of a name so well-known even a child would recognize it.

“Momotarou!?”

“His extermination of the oni is the simplest symbolism there is when it comes to killing Youkai. Even if you gathered thousands upon thousands of deadly Youkai, I could kill the entire horde unharmed. Sorry, but if you were a human who could be killed by normal means, you might have actually lasted longer.”

She would not even try to use a gun or a knife.

She was the type to choose a different set of weapons when fighting a human or a Youkai.

And here, she had switched gears to truly become my natural enemy.

Part 19 (3rd person)

Inside the V-shaped flying wing that was Hyakki Yakou's mobile headquarters, the group's Mamedanuki let out a smoky sigh. The Youkai was less than thirty centimeters tall and looked like a stuffed tanuki, but her(?) role was that of a body double.

For that reason, she was ridiculously good at information analysis.

What information should be thrown out and what information should be protected? Who suspected her and who trusted her? If she made a single lie to protect herself, how would it eventually come back and affect her? If she could not instantly analyze all that and smoothly make a decision, she would never have been given the job of a body double.

Currently, that expert of a Manedanuki was grimacing while staring at the documents on the low table she lay on.

"Honestly, he let the kind noise get the better of him. Does he really think a contact who supports things behind the scenes could really defeat a professional monster if he stood in harm's way? And against someone who built a Momotarou specialized in slaughtering Youkai no less."

It was hard to think he stood a chance.

And oddly enough, a certain mindset would view that itself as a reason to fight.

That mindset was an ally of the weak.

Those were the heroes of epics told the world over and of the fictional period drams and westerns derived from those epics. The deeds of those heroes were indeed attractive, but that was the attraction of doing something that would normally never succeed. If one hundred people attempted them, not all of them would be successful.

That attraction was the maw of a great monster.

If you let it tempt you, you would be unable to resist its pull and its many fangs would tear you to pieces.

“That idiot is going to die. And yet he’s seen countless people disappear in this same way.”

At that point, a voice directly opposed the Mamedanuki’s accurate analysis.

“He won’t lose.”

The voice came from a small child of an already small species.

The puppy was only about five centimeters tall and he looked up at the Mamedanuki with his four legs braced against the floor.

He stared straight up at her.

“Daddy won’t lose to a bad guy.”

“You’re right,” muttered the Mamedanuki while toying with her slender Japanese-style pipe. “He still hasn’t settled things with me. And he won’t give this an ending that would make the lady sad.”

Part 20

The hard creaking sound of the armor continued.

It was coming.

I didn't know how it worked, but that ridiculous attack that instantly grew to several dozen times its size was coming.

"…!!!!!!"

The massive fist tore through the air itself as it flew straight toward me.

I only had the athletic ability of a small dog, so I could never avoid it even if I jumped out of the way now.

But I was a Sunekosuri.

I was a Youkai that could do nothing more than rub up against travelers' shins in the night. But even if that was a useless ability, my movements could reach the supernatural when doing that.

"Oh?"

The girl wearing the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach sounded surprised.

To her, it may have looked like my small form suddenly vanished.

In truth, I had only snuck right up to her feet.

The great destruction arrived a moment later.

That building had looked so sturdy, but a great din burst out as the first floor was torn to pieces as easily as a spider web.

My chest hurt, but I had avoided the attack.

And from here…!!

As soon as that thought came to me, I heard a hard sound.

The soft girl's skin I was rubbing my cheek against changed to cold and hard metal.

She made such a skilled recovery that my mind grew absolutely blank.

She did not hesitate to bring her Japanese armored foot down to crush my back. It was a sharp strike as if from a pile driver. At the same time, the armor made of metal and leather expanded and increased its destructive force with its incredible mass.

I was fairly certain I heard something break inside my body.

But in reality, I was feeling the ground cave in and collapse below me because of all the weight bearing down on me. Yes, there was a space underground. I should have been crushed between the giant foot and the ground, but the thin layer of ground broke instead and I fell into the space below.

But wait.

The space below the lawn would be…!

"Cough, cough."

I heard coughing from surprisingly nearby.

A large pile of dirt covered my head and someone was looking down at me instead of worrying about themselves.

"Wh-what is it? This isn't a tornado. What is going on? And…and why are you bleeding so much?"

Dammit!! How could I let myself fall into the very place I had the old men and women evacuate to!? This is no different from pushing them right in front of the wild beast!!

"Hee hee."

Directly above, I heard the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach girl laugh.

The gentle aroma of peaches invaded this supposed area of safety.

"Hee hee. Hee hee hee."

"Ahhhhhhhhh!!"

I could not let the fight come here. I had to avoid a location that would get them involved.

I immediately moved through the elderly group by travelling from shin to shin. My swift movement looked like someone darting through the gaps in a forest or like the movements of a snake or eel. My goal was the stairway leading up and the door to the surface. Nothing mattered except starting this anew from a position that would not put the old men and women in danger.

But my efforts were not rewarded.

By the time I had run up the stairs and to the door, the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach had already attacked.

The giant arm of armor defeated the entire purpose of an underground structure much like destroying a car's roof to turn it into a convertible. The wrecking ball of a fist approached along with a tremendous amount of dirt and knocked me and the steel door into the air outside.

I did not even have it in me to cry out.

When my small body finally slammed into the ground, I found myself a disturbing distance away. This was the area with the playground equipment. Specifically, I had landed on the gas range of the grill set.

I can't win.

Even if infinite options spread out before my eyes, every single one of them would ultimately lead to my death. The girl wearing the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach had made that a reality. She had set things up that way before beginning the battle. That was why I could not win. It did not matter how much I struggled. In fact, the more I struggled, the more I would be hopelessly cornered.

"Ahh, ahh. I was spotted."

I heard a footstep.

"So which would you prefer? Should I slaughter those old people after roasting you or should I wait to roast you afterwards? Now that they saw a professional at work, their fate is sealed. You can choose whichever order you like, though."

I heard another.

She was slowly approaching, but I could not move. I was like a fish on the chopping block. I could not even move enough to fall from the dangerous-looking gas range.

The unnaturally gentle peach aroma reached my nose.

The girl controlling and wearing the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach had arrived close enough to look down on my bloody form. Her expression was less that of someone preparing a meal and more that of a child torturing a captured insect. But despite knowing what fate awaited me, I could not make the nimble movements of a movie star.

An ominous vibration shook the gas range and myself.

When I realized her slender fingers had grabbed the ignition switch, an unpleasant feeling ran down my spine.

“Have you learned your place yet?”

“A-all too much.”

“Then die.”

Her smooth and unhesitating words seemed to burn my stomach as she spoke without holding back.

“I’d really rather not eat dog, but it would be a shame to have you go to waste. How about I feed you to those old people? I wonder how they would react to that.”

“But thanks to this, I’ve learned some of the secret behind your Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach.”

Her fingers on the switch paused for just an instant.

But this pause was rooted in interest and curiosity, not fear and caution. She seemed to be saying she would ignite the gas range the instant those feelings cooled down.

“It’s not quite accurate to say that strange armor harms me as a Youkai. The punching and kicking aren’t what really matter. If so, you wouldn’t be trying to cook me on a gas range in the end. You can’t kill a Youkai by stabbing them or shooting them, even with a harmless Youkai like me. Even a gas range is a normal method.

Using it to torture me is one thing, but you wouldn't choose it as a finishing blow."

"Meaning?"

"You use two different supernatural powers. The first is the armor and the second is *the creation of a field in which Youkai can be killed with normal methods.* And outside the armor, there's only one symbol of Momotarou here: that peach aroma. You scatter that around to prepare the environment needed to exterminate the oni."

The girl gave a surprisingly cute laugh of confirmation.

"You may look pretty stupid, but you made it that far, did you? Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach includes both a Shikigami and a fire altar. Combining Onmyoudou and Mikkyou is a heretical method much like combining non-complementary foods for a gimmicky dish. That's why it should have slipped past any specialists in this field. …It looks like taking on an idiot backfired."

"You were never wielding any especially strong power; you were weakening us Youkai. That armor is being used entirely to attack. It isn't actually protecting you at all."

If she could truly wield such unmatched power, she would not have needed to use a gun when killing Udou Itsuki's body double. It would be best to assume her supernatural power, the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach, could only wield its full power against a Youkai.

"So?" She tilted her head. "Whatever the case, you're still going to die here. Just like any old dog, you can easily be killed with a knife or gun right now. Or are you so stupid you don't even know what it is you're lying on or what my right hand is holding?

"Ha ha." I laughed without meaning to. "Maybe it's because you scatter that peach aroma everywhere, but have you really not noticed anything 'off'?"

"…?"

"This is indeed an outdoor gas range used for cookouts. And it's really easy to ignite because a gas pipe buried underground carries fuel to it. But what if someone had sabotaged it ahead of time?"

She stopped breathing when I said that.

She seemed to have finally noticed the stink mixed in with the peach aroma.

"I'm a weak Youkai that can't do anything more than a small dog and I have no traits that would let me kill a human, but even a small dog's prank can cause a disaster. For example, he could bite through the rubber hose connected to the gas line."

"Do you really understand what you're saying?"

"And your technique only provides offense! You completely ignored defense because you assumed any Youkai weakened by the peach aroma couldn't do anything worth worrying about. So what if someone brings a normal method into this? If you're caught in a gas explosion, I doubt you'll escape unharmed!!"

"My fire altar is still weakening you, so you can't say you won't die because you're a Youkai. If there's an explosion here, that normal method will-…!!"

"Yes, I know."

As I spoke, I moved my mouth to show off my teeth.

Specifically, I showed off the piece of flint the size of a sesame seed I had glued to my canine tooth. I had taken apart a cheap lighter I had found inside the facility to get the flint.

And after choosing to show it off, I made an announcement.

"*But what does that matter, you damn roach?*"

I immediately clacked my canine teeth together.

You'll probably never understand just what strength fills my heart while I desire to help these complete strangers without trying to earn anything from it myself.

And that is why you will lose!!

A tiny orange spark burst into the dark night.

The look on the girl's face had been that of someone who had never once thought of anything but her own victory, but in this instant, I saw that look distort.

And a moment later…

…my vision…

…grew…white.

Part 21

I was gasping for breath.

My vision faded in and out. I felt like I would lose consciousness if I stopped focusing for even an instant. I was lying on the lawn a good distance away from the grill set. I heard what sounded like a crackling fire and a corner of the facility grounds was glowing orange.

I desperately tried to stand, but I could not put my legs below me. My front right leg would not move as I told it to. Half of my vision was covered in something dark. Part of me may have been broken or burned, but I was a Youkai, so it was possible I would naturally recover. After all, we generally gathered strength through the passage of time. Even so, I had no way of healing my wounds right away.

“This isn’t…”

I gave up on standing and practically dragged my face along the ground to move at about the speed of a caterpillar.

“This isn’t over yet…”

I had to evacuate the old men and women from the facility grounds. I had not been able to predict where the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet Peach girl would attack, so I had sabotaged the gas lines all over the grounds to create as many attack points as possible. It had just so happened that the outdoor grill set was the one I ended up at. For example, I had also created a gas leak in the facility’s kitchen, so I needed to prepare for a possible ignition of that one as well.

And if Mai-san’s prediction was correct, the girl had been controlling Udou Itsuki’s (or his body double’s) organization and they had kept the deadly Aburatori somewhere on these grounds. I didn’t know what method they were using, but it was impossible to know who the Youkai would bare its fangs toward if the battle or fire woke it up.

That meant it would be best to have the old folks escape as soon as possible. My goal was not defeating the Brave Warrior of the Scarlet

Peach. No matter the reason, if even one of them died in the very end, it would mean I had lost.

And so I dragged my battered body toward those old men and women.

One day, when I found my missing wife and had my family back, I would be able to tell them with pride the path I had taken to reach that point.

I can't give in now.

Part 22 (3rd person)

A quiet noise sounded from the sea of spreading flames caused by the gas explosion.

“Oh…gh…”

“It” had a mouth to speak.

However, the exposure to the intense heat had completely destroyed its lips and throat.

“G-g-gah-gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh

Unable to speak properly and letting loose something like a roar, it forcefully stood up within that scorching orange hell.

The damage went beyond the face.

All of its skin had melted into something like a cream and fused with its crumbling clothing. Its entire body had become a twisted mass of muscle fibers. Its hair had vanished in the flames. Its soft subcutaneous fat had completely cooked and separated from its body, so it looked like a sexless anatomy model.

Even so, it did not die.

Something odd was mixed in with that model. An amber-dyed material that looked at least one hundred years old had been hidden below the skin. The material was placed around the body as if to strengthen the skeleton, so it looked like a cyborg made with traditional Japanese mechanisms.

With a wet sound, it walked through the flames. Its eyeballs had almost started to boil and its vision was as foggy as looking through frosted glass, but it still searched for a single target.

That being a harmless Youkai.

The Sunekosuri.

That Youkai had apparently not escaped unscathed, but he was better off than her. His lighter weight may have allowed the explosion to throw him outside the scorching hell.

She could not accept that.

She could not accept that his injuries were lighter than hers, that he was in a better position than her, that he was desperately crawling through this hellish scene to save some normal people, or that he had achieved victory despite being infected by the kind noise.

In short, she could not accept any of it.

(I’ll kill him.)

The girl tried to mutter under her breath, but her melted lips had fused together and she could not even do that.

(I’ll kill him! Crush him!! Ruin it all for him!!!! I have to do that if I’m going to get back on my feet. Whether it turns that damn Youkai into a corpse or a pile of flesh, I’ll thoroughly smash him to pieces!!)

She moved her melted body toward the Sunekosuri.

She would first smash the canine Youkai to pieces, show him to those old people, and then ask them to eat him. Any who refused, she would kill right then and there. Any who did eat him, she would line up and kill at the very end. Either way, she would slaughter them all.

But as soon as she made those plans, she heard what sounded more like an explosion than a gunshot and a fist-sized hole opened in her chest.

“Ah?”

What had once been a girl looked down to her own chest.

The flesh, blood, bone, and organs were all missing. She had been pierced straight through and what had been there was the most important of the human organs: the heart. It had vanished like a magic trick that stole the hearts of anyone who saw it.

It had been done so skillfully that she forgot to die.

It was just like a fish prepared and served while still alive. And her melted ears heard a dull electronic tone. A cellphone was ringing. The remains of what had been a skirt were stuck to the waist of that roasted anatomy model. She grabbed the device that had transformed into something like cheese melted on toast and she answered it.

The connection was so clear it seemed like some kind of an illusion.

She forcibly ripped her fused lips apart and finally managed to speak.

“Hishigami…Mai…”

“That’s right. You’re the one behind all this, aren’t you? Do you know what I did☆?”

“An anti-materiel rifle?

“Nope. Wrong. It was a .50 caliber heavy machinegun. But there are some crazy people who use them for sharpshooting from 2000 meters away. The rounds are the same after all.”

“No…the sound of the shot and the hit…were almost simultaneous. This is just like thunder and lightning… You have to be nearby. Where…are you? I was waiting here…to capture you. But you…had that Youkai…hound me. Get…out here. I’ll kill you…with my own hands.”

“Ha ha ha! I had the Sunekosuri hound you? Are you sure you want your dying words to be a pun!? And sorry, but I’m not about to take you head-on when you can still move around after all that. And I don’t think he was wrong when he said a normal method would kill you, so just die already. …Besides, I’ve 80% lost when I rely on a gun, so this definitely isn’t a fight I want a part of.”

“…”

The anatomy model briefly fell silent but finally spoke again.

“Why are…you here? To save the residents…of the old folks home? Or to…save that Sunekosuri?”

“Sorry, but I’m a professional who knows where to draw the line. I know all too well how frightening the kind noise can be. I’m not foolish enough to risk my life for something like that.”

“Then…”

Why had she attacked now?

Whether it was the Sunekosuri or the old people, the best time to take the shot would have been the instant the girl-turned-anatomy-model had killed her target and let her guard down.

“To be honest, my plan was to stir up the Sunekosuri, have him run off to where you were waiting, and then shoot you once you showed up because you were irritated with the eyesore of a Youkai running around.”

“…”

“But he did better than I had expected. He actually pulled off that absurd fairy tale of his. He didn’t quite finish the job, but dragging out your secret was quite valuable indeed. …That’s right. Momotarou did not have special power because of a legendary weapon or undergoing some amazing training. His very birth included the symbolism of the peach, a fruit believed to ward off evil. So you’re an evil-destroying cyborg given a boost by the scented wood placed inside your body. If I hadn’t noticed, I might have taken you too lightly and made a mistake.”

That terribly arrogant woman was saying her life had been saved by that stuffed animal of a Youkai.

“In that case, this is an agreement between professionals. Now that the Sunekosuri has achieved his goal of saving those old people and has also found your weakness for me, I should finish my own job. I’ll kill you, take care of the Aburatori, and bring this incident to an end. That dirty work is my part to play.”

She sounded almost jealous.

This tone was one she would never use in front of the Sunekosuri.

It was like she had seen something she had once possessed but had thrown away in order to survive.

And most likely, she was not really speaking to the anatomy model that had been their enemy.

Head, gut, waist, limbs, etc. Before thoroughly destroying every part of that girl’s body with .50 caliber bullets which were the size of hammerheads, Hishigami Mai muttered one last sentence.

“You were really cool, baby☆”

Chapter 4: ??? /// …The Timeline Collapses

Part 1 (3rd person)

When had the incident begun?

Late at night, the large Japanese-style living room of the old thatch-roofed Jinnai residence was filled with silence and darkness. The moonlight entering through the sliding door was only enough to see the faint outlines of objects. A large German grandfather clock that looked straight out of a nursery rhyme made a rhythmic noise with each movement of its seconds hand.

This was different from complete emptiness.

That faint stimulus increased the impression of stillness and darkness.

With the entire family asleep and the liveliness created by human beings gone, the tranquility almost felt cold.

But a Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata stood within that room.

And she was not alone.

Someone else faced her.

A brutal and deadly Youkai calmly stood there and was clearly out of place in the scenery created by the thatch-roof house.

“It’s been a while,” he said in a hoarse voice.

His expression was hidden, but not just by the surrounding darkness. He was dressed like a farmer and he had a habit of hiding his face with the conical hat that had a single large eye drawn on the top.

“I haven’t seen you since that incident, that child organ trafficking Package that was unleashed here in Noukotsu Village. You must remember. So how has Jinnai Shinobu-kun been since then?”

His voice seemed to permeate or corrode.

It seemed to desecrate not the people who heard it, but the very realm it filled. The voice alone was enough for the Zashiki Warashi to twist her eyebrows in displeasure, but this was not the same as the unpleasant feeling brought by scraping glass. She then spoke the very first thing on her mind.

"*I have no idea what incident you're talking about.*"

The deadly Youkai known as an Aburatori laughed beyond his eye hat.

Two Youkai calmly faced each other.

And a certain question once more reached the Zashiki Warashi's mind.

When had the incident begun?

Part 2 (Jinnai Shinobu)

Don’t act like we’re lovers just because we kissed a bit and you touched my breasts, you idiot.

“H-huh? What?”

Two minutes after that shocking turn of events, I was still unsure if I should cry or get mad as I returned to my classroom with a hand on my stinging cheek.

It was the end of our midday break.

Lunch time and fun time had passed and the hastier straight-A students were already preparing their textbooks and notebooks on their desks.

Just like always, Kotemitsu Madoka-chan was messing with her cellphone instead of joining in with the rest of the class. In order to get a conversation started, I threw myself onto her desk.

“Ahhhh! Madoka-san, please console me!!”

“Romance advice is too high a hurdle for a lonely beauty like me.”

“Sorry, but that romance just ended! That’s why I want you to console me! C’mon, c’mon. Will you pet my head? Or you can try something a little more indecent if you like.”

“From that, I take it you’ve thrown me in the ‘complete lost cause’ category.”

“Now, now, Madoka-san. Let’s not say anything sad like that. A-and wait. Does that mean you *are* an option? Why didn’t you say so sooner!? (Rummage rummage)”

“Now you’re searching through your wallet for a condom right in front of me? I’m in the joke category for you, aren’t I!?”

Madoka, you fool.

Going for a lady-killer aura here would only make the girl put up her guard. I have to make her think it could never happen so she lowers the hurdle. Then as the conversation continues, she suddenly realizes she’s *taken a step beyond simple joking! You fool, this is already a romantic minefield!!*

There's no point in holding onto love that has already ended. I, Jinnai Shinobu, will continue on to the next stage not three seconds later!!

Meanwhile, Madoka gave me the same look she would give an investment fraud pamphlet titled "Always Make 100% Returns, Guaranteed!"

"And don't you already have someone for this kind of thing? Y'know, that something-or-other Nagisa."

"Y-you idiot! How clueless can you be!? She's in the top three of the world's yandere rankings. Bring her into anything remotely related to romance and you'll end up with flying blades and shed blood no matter what you do!!"

"Hee hee hee. You rang, Shinobu-chan?"

A quiet voice snuck up directly behind me and my entire body jumped as if I were in an electric chair.

I very hesitantly turned around and found that love monster's grinning face.

She was known as the scissors girl, the knife girl, the katana girl, the hammer girl, the wire girl, and…what else was there? She had too many dark nicknames to remember them all.

"What's this, what's this? A love story? Romance advice? Love is so wonderful. Shinobu-chan, you can ask me anything. What seems to be the problem? Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh."

"Y-you've got it all wrong, Nagisa. Nothing's going on that warrants you showing up. If you interfere, it'll lead to nothing but pain and trauma!!"

The next thing I knew, Madoka was enthralled in her cellphone. She had probably gotten sick of dealing with me and thus called in someone even harder to deal with.

At this point, there was nothing I could do.

I had to send an SOS to a specialist in this kind of battlefield.

"Nooo!! Help me, Love King!! I've been sucked into a crucible of fear and you’re the only one who can help me escape!!”

“Shut up, Jinnai. ‘Before it starts’ and ‘after it ends’ are outside my expertise. Come back later.”

That annoyed comment came from an odd neighbor who was exclusively an expert in love advice for the lovey-dovey couples going through a messy soap opera.

“And whatever latent factors might have been inside Nagisa-chan, you’re still the one that pulled the trigger. Y’know, that legendary incident from middle school that ended up in a fight with actual swords.”

“Cough cough!! D-don’t bring up that spectacular failure right now! I swore I would never again go for love that takes the ‘ero’ out of ‘ero guro’!!”

Part 3 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

"What? A questioning?"

As I made a revolutionary new kind of egg zosui by dumping plain salted rice balls in a convenience store egg soup cup and mixing in hot water, the chief of Investigation Department 1, Mezu Gen, gave me a disgusted look before telling me the following.

"The suspect is from a group that accessed abandoned SNS accounts – that is, ones with no logins for over a year – and started posting things both true and false. At first, we thought it was meant to influence the stock market or the futures market for Intellectual Village brand crops, so Department 2 was handling it. But it looks like things have changed. …And that attempt at zosui is disturbing."

"But why is Department 1 getting involved? Did they post about a murder they were going to commit or something? …And someone whose wife makes his lunch every day has no right to mock a failed attempt at securing sustenance."

"I don't know the details, so go ask that career employee in Department 2. Y'know, the kid in glasses. …And I put in plenty of work to hold my household together. I don't want to hear anything from someone content with single life."

"Why do you hate the career employees that much? I do understand being jealous, though. …And what do you mean you put in plenty of work!? You aren't threatening a young woman with that face that would make a hardened criminal piss himself, are you!?"

He threw a thick case file at me and I fled with the homemade egg zosui cup in hand. To reach the interrogation room on a different floor, I first ran to the elevator hall.

The automatic metal doors opened to either side and I saw a familiar face inside.

It was Chief Superintendent Mishima, one of the highest members of the National Police Agency.

How high up was he, you ask? The only positions above him were the Senior Commissioner and the exceptional positions like the

Superintendent General and Chief of Police. To someone stuck in a dead end job at the second rank from the bottom, he seemed above the clouds.

But what did a VIP of the NPA that dealt with the entire country want with the Metropolitan Police Department that only protected the peace of Tokyo?

With that question in mind, I stepped onto the elevator with him and pressed the button for my destination floor.

Once the door closed, he watched the floor indicator light and spoke.

“Are you on your way to a job?”

“I am always working.”

“*This questioning* sounds difficult, but do your best. I have high hopes for you, Uchimaku-kun, so I put in a good word so you can do your job more comfortably.”

“What kind of support are you talking about?”

“That’s quite something you’re eating there. It’s a blasphemy toward egg zosui. Oh, are you going to give that to the suspect to get a confession? Like an opposite of the usual katsudon?”

“This is a treat for myself!! And more importantly… Ah, wait!!”

The elevator doors opened and he quickly left.

Just before the automatic metal doors closed, he glanced back toward me.

“*You need to assume this is the last time you will receive any help that comes at such a loss, okay?*”

I was left alone on the elevator with that ominous comment.

I felt like I had been placed on some strange track without even realizing it. Just like with a surprise birthday party, everything around me started to seem suspicious.

However, the Metropolitan Police Department did not offer enough freedom to let me abandon my duty over a bit of suspicion.

I arrived at my destination floor and made my way to the interrogation room.

Waiting near the door was a rich guy in glasses whose appearance practically screamed “In summer, it’s cool biz! In winter, it’s warm biz! In other words, I have different expensive suits for different seasons!!”

We had joined at around the same time, but he was already a superintendent. Rank-wise, he was already higher than my department chief. I just couldn’t stand it.

His name was Gyoutani Jouji and this was the first thing out of his mouth.

“Whoa!! What the hell are you eating!?”

“Can I leave, four eyes?”

“That would be a problem. A huge problem. To be honest, we give up.”

“How could it be that bad?”

“Just get on in there. This is your problem now. Here’s the file. It has the suspect’s history, why they were taken into protective custody, and everything we want to ask them. Now get on in there.”

He shoved the thick pile of documents into my chest and pushed my back to almost throw me into the interrogation room. *Is this suspect that horrible a person?* I wondered while looking down at the file instead of the actual suspect. But that was when another question occurred to me.

Why they were taken into protective custody? Not why they were arrested?

That question was quickly answered by the suspect’s voice.

“Hi there, detective☆”

N-

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

“Oh, c’mon. Your future bride, Enbi-chan, is here to have some fun, so don’t scream like a college student running into an axe murderer at a campground. Boo boo.”

“Open up!! Open this door!! Why are you locking me in a room with this mystery freak? I won’t get mad, so just tell me the truth!!”

I pounded on the steel door, but the lock showed no sign of opening.

I did hear the exhausted voice of the glasses guy from beyond the door, though.

“I said we’d given up, didn’t I!? Every time we went in there, she insisted she would only speak with you. And when we threatened her a bit, what do you think she did? She started stripping!! She’s completely taking advantage of her position as a minor. She’s using the transparency system against us to embarrass us in court!!”

“C’mon, detective. You get the situation now, don’t you? If you don’t sit down and listen to what I have to say, it’ll be time for some baby-making with an audience beyond the one-way mirror.”

My headache was out of control.

When I sat in the chair across from the mystery freak and placed the thick file and egg zosui on the table, she frowned.

“What are you eating? Is that a sort of gentle suicide?”

“I’m going to eat this now, so talk as much as you want in that time. …For starters, you could tell me what you did to get arrested.”

“I was taken into protective custody, actually. This way I could speak with you while avoiding all the boring procedure. That’s how urgent the situation is. Do you get that?”

“And what exactly did you do to get brought here?”

“I wanted to get in here but they wouldn’t let me, right? So I had no choice but to start taking off my-…”

“I get the picture, so let’s get back to the main issue.”

“What’s wrong with the Metropolitan Police Department? If you’re a police station, you’re supposed to let the people speak with you.”

I made a mental note to buy a drink for Nakata-san, the guard at the main entrance.

“So what is this urgent situation?”

“It’s related to a Package. In fact, I had infiltrated the headquarters of the ones assembling it. Unfortunately it looks like things have changed there, so I had to contact you in a hurry.”

“You were infiltrating them?”

“That lecture can wait. Plus I’m a freelancer who isn’t bound by the police’s way of doing things. …Anyway, the problem is their Package. It’s dangerous. Really dangerous.”

“They’re building up a Package that frightening?”

“No, the opposite.” Enbi shrugged. “It’s completely out of control. Or maybe it would be better to say the Youkai has taken control of it. It was being assembled by an amateur group that was foiled by scamming countermeasures, but now the Youkai holds their lives in its hands and they have to do what it says.”

“So the Youkai is in control of anywhere from a few dozen to over a hundred lives?”

“And the Youkai can take every single one of those lives with a single fingertip. But after what they’ve done, they can’t exactly ask the police for protection. You can see this won’t lead anywhere good, right? It’s like amateur medicine. Trying to fix the problem without the help of an expert is just a bad idea. In this case, we’ll be lucky if it’s only *the criminals in question whose lives are lost*.”

I didn’t know what kind of Youkai this was, but if it said to kill someone, at least a few dozen people would act on that order. If it asked for a sacrifice, that many people would kidnap someone, and so on. That was definitely no laughing matter. If the people involved kept making the excuse that “it can’t be helped”, they could eventually stop feeling any guilt. If they were cut off from others enough, those few people could even trick themselves into thinking they were the majority that determined what the proper values were. It was similar to how bloody traditions could remain in an isolated village.

It was true something had to be done, but there were no laws to judge a Youkai.

This was yet another pain-in-the-ass case.

“So what kind of Youkai is it? And what kind of Package did they put together?”

“This one’s unprecedented. It’s a completely unprecedented crime, detective. Even if this had all gone as planned, there would be no law to judge them with. The world’s system would have fallen behind. This might be a crime that should have left its name in history.”

“What?”

“That Youkai hijacked the Package, the young people who assembled it, and everything else and it’s trying to do something huge. We have to stop this here.”

The mystery freak paused for a moment and then slowly continued.

“We must stop the Aburatori’s plan.”

Part 4 (Hishigami Mai)

Kenzan Village was an Intellectual Village at the base of the Japanese Alps.

However, its situation was a little different from the other villages. It was not making tons of money off of the brand name rural scenery through crops and sightseeing. In that case, what was the foundation of its industry?

“U-uuh… This place is kind of uncomfortable. It looks like a nice old farm village, but I feel like I’m surrounded by a concrete city.”

“That’s because people online call this place Accelerator Village. A limited express railroad tunnel through the mountains was abandoned after the opening of the linear motor train line, so they built a fifteen kilometer straight line particle accelerator there. Also, the plains were used to build a circular particle accelerator with a radius of eight kilometers. They even have a pure water pool underground to observe those neutrinos that are all the rage these days. They supposedly have plenty of other facilities too, so the nanotech and particle businesses are pouring research funding into them. It probably isn’t the best sightseeing spot for Youkai like you, Sunekosuri.”

“I thought the selling point of Intellectual Villages was how they turned the rural into a brand name product. If they aren’t producing any crops, what’s the point in registering as one?”

“What are you talking about? Academia is a world of brand names as well. How well a new theory reaches the world is entirely dependent on who proposes it. Start looking into what schools people went to and you’ll notice a trend before long. …But Kenzan Village has built up a brand that ensures your findings will reach the world regardless of who they come from. Just like owning the world’s #1 supercomputer, they can reliably produce intellectual property with their massive amounts of experimental data.”

“But the pamphlet said sightseeing is one of its main draws.”

“Well, it is the Accelerator Village.”

“Why do humans like to go look at giant dams and things like that?" The small canine Youkai cutely tilted his head. "By the way, can private corporations really reuse an abandoned tunnel like this? I thought railroads were considered public facilities and treated just like public roads."

"First, this country's railroads are privatized. Second, there are precedents for reusing abandoned tunnels. People have used them for wine cellars or as dark rooms to grow white asparagus. From there, it's just an issue of the two corporations talking it out. Plus, I'm sure no one minds if they're reused for something high-tech like this."

"And we're sneaking into that heavily-guarded facility?"

"It's for a job," I casually replied. "Due to their origins, Intellectual Villages dislike police involvement. I mentioned that before, right? That means they need to install cameras all over to protect their three hundred thousand yen grapes from wild boars and crop thieves. …But if you understand how all that works, you can find a way around it. It's nothing more than a common security network using the same internet that connects the world. That means there's an opening somewhere to get in. There's no such thing as perfect security, after all."

"But didn't you say this isn't like a normal Intellectual Village? It's a giant experimental facility with several large-scale particle accelerators. Won't it have a bunch of human guards?"

"Do you really think they'll be faithfully carrying out the patrols listed in the paperwork? These devices slam together hadrons or positrons or whatever to break them apart. They'll send radiation everywhere, so the hired guards won't want to get anywhere near them."

"Ah!!!???"

"It can't escape the shielding. We'll be sneaking inside that shielding, though."

With that, we dashed right on into Accelerator Village. I'll skip how exactly we managed it, but you can just assume it was a piece of cake.

After descending below the thick earth and concrete, we arrived at a giant pool surrounded in faint light. It was about fifty meters across and ten meters deep. We stood next to it, but it was more like an aquarium's walkway than a poolside. Thick glass let us see inside the pool.

"What is this?"

"The pure water pool. A device in Kobe emits neutrinos and all sorts of data is taken here. It practically prints money in the form of patents, patents, and more patents."

"O-oh. I don't really get it."

"If I punched this glass, it'd ruin a three trillion yen facility. Want me to do it?"

"I may not get it, but no thanks!!"

The area around the pool was large. It clearly didn't need to be that big, but the more they dug, the more the contractor earned, so someone had likely interfered on their behalf.

"Ee…ee…"

I heard some stiff breathing that was not quite a voice, but I ignored it and looked around.

"The place is officially said to be under public observance, but it's actually a giant sealed space. Yeah, this would be perfect for slowly and carefully assembling a shady Package. Not even the workers come in here except the maintenance required once every other year."

The floor was littered with Buddhist ritual items that they had likely bought from a secondhand shop. I saw opened sutras, an altar decorated with gold leaf, an incense burner, a five-pronged vajra, rope, staffs, mandala, various talismans, and wooden tags with the five elements of fire, water, wind, earth, and void written on them. The tags may have been meant as a type of pagoda. People often thought of Packages as modern high-tech crimes, but it was all based on this. How well one broke down and reintegrated it all so it could be fused with a modern SNS, cellphone, AR, or smart house was where the assembler showed his or her skill.

"B-based on this equipment, I'd say they were Mikkyou followers."

"Sorry, but no. Look more carefully. All of the equipment has been lightened and creatively modified to be taken apart or folded up. It looks like it was all made to be portable.”

“Oh, Shugendo! It’s all made so they can easily carry it through the mountains.”

“Correct. Shugendo linked Mikkyou with mountain worship, so maybe that was why it was so hard to notice. Conveniently, this Intellectual Village is at the base of the Japanese Alps, so they’re probably controlling a deadly Youkai with the rituals meant to praise a mountain god and suppress a vengeful spirit.”

“But…”

“They failed spectacularly. That’s why Hyakki Yakou caught wind of them.”

The breathing sounds that resembled a broken flute grew louder.

Annoyed, I looked over at the trembling fat man.

“H-Hya-Hyakki Yakou!? N-no… I n-never heard anyone that dangerous was coming!!”

“You didn’t think you’d run across them sooner or later once you went for a Youkai? That’s like having a loud party in their backyard.”

“But…we can’t do this! We’re already…already in over our heads!!”

“*Yeah, this is pretty bad.*”

With that casual comment, I turned toward the pool.

The large body of perfectly pure water had been prepared to catch invisible light waves or neutrinos, but at the very bottom were some objects that clearly did not belong. There were several dozen if not several hundred fist-sized objects. They were packed in plastic and piled up like stones on a riverbed.

They were all hearts.

Even though they were packaged like ready-made Salisbury steak and even though they had left their owners’ bodies, they were rhythmically pulsating. The researchers only checked the pool for their data readings, so no one would notice unless those readings changed.

"…?"

It didn't seem the Sunekosuri had realized what the objects in the pool were.

Or perhaps he was subconsciously refusing to accept the abnormal scene and number.

"So you have to do what the deadly Youkai says because it has taken your 'insides' hostage? Pathetic. You want those 'insides' more than anything and they're right there beyond the glass, but reaching your hand inside would alter the purity of the water and set off an alarm. That's-…"

I trailed off as something caught in the back of my mind.

A deadly Youkai was threatening the criminals by removing their organs and the Youkai had taken over the Package.

Had I heard of an incident like that before?

"*No, there was never anything like that.*"

After rejecting that idea, another question came to mind.

It was unusual for me to hesitate over information related to past incidents which were always filled with grudges and resentment. If I could not instantly recall those things, I could be stabbed in the back or side at any moment.

"It wasn't…it wasn't supposed to be like this. Dammit, how could this happen? I-I can only think that bastard was guiding us toward failure from the beginning. Otherwise, we never would have overlooked such a fundamental flaw!!"

"It's too late for that now. You're past the point where you can recover from this. Unless you can turn back time, there's no hope for you."

"Heh heh… Wh-what's going to happen to us?"

"What do you think I was sent here to do?" I asked back. "Surely you don't think the great Hyakki Yakou is in such desperate need for technology that they would ask me to bring back the technicians."

"Heh heh… Heh heh heh!! Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh

heh heh heh heh heh heh heh!!"

The fat man looked like a broken doll.

I gave him an exasperated look and he spoke.

"Right, right. Of course this is happening. I had a feeling it would. No, I was certain it would. But there's nowhere to run. That's why I'm still here."

"My condolences."

"But this could still work out."

"?"

"Don't worry, I don't think I can turn this around. But…still… *If I die here, things could eventually work out for me*. That's what I mean."

After that nonsensical statement, a solid sound and a red liquid came from his mouth.

"W-wah!! He just bit his tongue!" cried the Sunekosuri.

"That isn't enough to kill you. You watch too many dramas."

He collapsed and writhed around in pain as I slowly approached. He was rolling around quite a bit for someone who was prepared for death and I looked down on him with utter contempt.

"Suffering that won't kill you makes you want to die a lot more actually dying, doesn't it? …And what was that suggestive comment just now? I'm sure it's related to this Package. If you can't speak, then write it out, but tell me everything. You can use the blood you've scattered everywhere."

"Cough, cough, cough, cough."

"Just to be clear, I can't save you, so don't hope that I can. Even if the blood loss won't kill you right away, biting your tongue lets you slowly suffocate. And it's much, muuuuch slower than hanging yourself. …So if you tell me the truth, I'll give you a quick death. What other compromise could I give?"

Part 5 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I deftly slipped past the questions asked by Nagisa-chan, hell’s love demon, and splendidly avoided the chisels she threw at me.

Oh, right!! Her current nickname is Chisel Girl!!

As the near-death experience brought back that memory, our timid homeroom teacher arrived for the afternoon class and I tried to solve the problem by getting her involved.

Unfortunately, she began to foam at the mouth and collapsed as soon as she saw the look on Nagisa’s face.

I had clearly chosen the wrong person to use as a shield, but I managed to survive by taking a new hostage. Nagisa’s current boyfriend Akechi-kun had just returned from playing soccer.

All of this was the standard midday scene for our class. Can you believe that?

Afterschool, I was mentally exhausted, so I decided to take full advantage of not belonging to a club or team by going home and taking a nap.

However…

“What’s that construction noise?”

“Oh. Let me be the first to welcome you home.”

The flat-chested Yuki Onna called out to me in the yard, but my eyes were glued to the thatch-roof house. Then again, that was no longer an accurate description.

“Why is the entire roof gone!? It looks like a convertible!!”

The answer came from the Nekomata who was using unshaved high-quality katsuobushi as a body pillow.

“The entire roof is apparently being replaced. They have to get all the work done on a single sunny day, so it isn’t easy for the workers.”

I noticed my family and the Youkai sitting on a picnic blanket in the yard with plenty of snacks prepared. They were clearly prepared to kill some time. However, this ruined my plans. There was no way I could get a good nap in with all these people moving around.

“I’m so tired. I want to sleep, but I can’t.”

I carelessly muttered my thoughts aloud and the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata and the Succubus’s ears pricked up as they played handheld game systems.

“Shinobu. I’m sorry, but it’s one of my Youkai traits. Even if you aren’t in a futon, I might still sneak in with you.”

“Oh, is this a job for me? I’ll give you as many good or bad dreams as you want, free of charge!”

“Please stop!! I just want a healthy and peaceful nap! I don’t want some dangerous adventure!!”

I staggered through the yard and sat in the shade of a tree.

The noise was so loud that my mind wouldn’t calm down even when I closed my eyes. But when I tried to mess with my phone, my head felt heavy and my reaction speed seemed to drop, so I was definitely drowsy.

I tried to think while displaying different photos on the small screen. I had a lot of data because I had ben transferring it all over ever since several phones ago.

I found a shocking photo of the night I had spent in an abandoned house in the mountains. There had been a full moon that night and Nagisa had been walking around with a giant machete. Had that really happened? So much had happened with Nagisa that it could be hard to remember every little thing, but if there was a photo of it, it must have happened.

Ugh, when I stop moving, the drowsiness really gets to me.

But I had a feeling falling asleep then would lead to a nightmare of Nagisa chasing me around at her worst.

“Um, it looks to me like Jinnai Shinobu’s body is sinking further and further into that tree trunk.”

"Oh, my. The big Furutsubaki is trying to envelop him."

What!?

I frantically pulled my head from the tree trunk that had gained the consistency of gelatin.

Th-that was a close one!! It may not count as a deadly one, but this thing's still a Youkai!! I can't let my guard down!!

I scrambled away from the large tree and a small girl in a kimono approached me. But this was not the Yuki Onna. Another Youkai lived in our house who fit that description.

It was the small Furutsubaki.

She had been involved in the previous incident with *an Australian witch.*

Currently, she held out a cup of barley tea.

"Here."

"Eh? O-oh, sure."

I was thankful, but why was she so brusque?

First the big one and now the small one. Do plant Youkai have a problem with me or something?

My question must have shown on my face because the small Furutsubaki puffed out her cheeks and explained.

"All the others don't like you because you always support the cherry trees."

"Eh? That's all? But if you're gonna compare cherry blossoms with camellias…"

"That's what I mean. That's exactly what I mean!!"

"This goes so deep you had to say it twice!? B-but aren't camellias supposed to be bad luck? They even say not to bring them to sick people."

"Cherry blossoms aren't much better. There are dead bodies buried beneath their trees!"

“That’s a literary expression. Burying dead bodies beneath them has no bearing on how pretty the flowers are.”

“It’s always cherry blossoms with you!! You always take their side!!”

I didn’t understand what the issue was, but it was apparently a big deal in the plant kingdom(?). Despite how she looked, the small Furutsubaki was a Youkai and could do serious harm if she reverted to her tree mode and performed a body press. I could end up meeting a similar fate to the monkey in The Crab and the Monkey.

So to calm the upset small Furutsubaki, I made some random concessions while taking the barley tea in one hand.

“Fine, fine. From now on, I’ll use shampoo with camellia oil and I’ll hold a flower viewing for camellias just like with cherry blossoms. Actually, when do camellias even bloom?”

“…………………………………………………………………………………

“Why is your face so red and why aren’t you saying anything? I can never figure out your reactions.”

The small Furutsubaki did not respond, so the Nekomata sighed and did so in her place.

“For a tree, the flowers are the organs that lure in insects with their colors and sweet aroma in order to promote the pollination between the stamen and pistil. In other words, the flowers are their reproductive organs. You just said you would drink sake while looking at them and wash your hair with the juices they produce. Try not to be such a pervert. It’s scary.”

“What the hell kind of culture gap is this!? I was just talking about some heartwarming Japanese culture, but you’re making me out to be some terrible deviant. Are you sure humans and Youkai can ever truly understand each other on a fundamental level!?”

Part 6 (3rd person)

Late at night, the once-a-year changing of the thatch roof was complete and the merrymaking to thank the workers was over. (As they served junmai daiginjo that cost fifty thousand yen a cup, far more workers would show up than necessary.) The dark house was now enveloped by a deep silence that was a stark contrast to the previous noise.

The residents could be heard breathing in their sleep.

The grandfather clock made noise.

Crickets were chirping outside.

Instead of blocking out the sound, the sliding doors and screens seemed to process it like a musical instrument. The softened sounds resembled harmonious ambient music that removed any fear from the darkness.

Or at least, it should have.

That was usually the case during nights in the Jinnai house.

However, the Zashiki Warashi keenly sensed the darkness pressing in on her from every direction. It felt like she had been thrown into the mouth of some giant beast.

"…"

It was complete coincidence that she discovered "it".

It happened just after she left her own room to follow her Youkai trait and sneak into the sleeping boy's futon.

But it may have been inevitable for "it".

Lured in by a sense that something was not quite right, she walked through the house and reached the large Japanese living room.

The German grandfather clock sounded louder than usual.

For some reason, the wooden rain shutters were open and the moonlight shined brightly in from the porch.

She sensed a hint of the autumn wind.

"It" stood smiling with only its silhouette visible against the outside light.

"It's been a while," said a hoarse elderly voice.

He wore a deeply dyed kimono that was kept short to keep mud off. He wore leggings to protect his legs. He wore a conical hat with a large eye pattern that covered both his head and his face. He was dressed just like a farmer, but the murderous aura enveloping him was different. He was one who abducted and one who killed. Anyone could tell at a glance that he was deadly and did not belong, but everyone would overlook him until the disaster had already occurred. He was a collection of malice that ranked at the top of even the deadly Youkai.

When had the incident begun?

Once she saw the Aburatori, the Zashiki Warashi narrowed her eyes a little. She became strongly aware of forgotten pain, a lost part of her body, and the modifications Hyakki Yakou had made inside her.

Meanwhile, the symbol of abduction who was dressed as a farmer happily opened his mouth.

"I haven't seen you since that incident, that child organ trafficking Package that was unleashed here in Noukotsu Village. You must remember. So how has Jinnai Shinobu-kun been since then?"

His words were unavoidable.

He was merely confirming something he already knew perfectly well.

It was the same as deriving pleasure from provoking and jabbing at the hurting hearts of a bereaved family.

The Zashiki Warashi remained silent for a while.

When she finally spoke, she did so slowly.

"*I have no idea what incident you're talking about.*"

Silence followed.

Tension filled the air like a thin thread had been grabbed on either end and pulled until it was about to snap.

However, her response had not been wrong.

A moment later, the Aburatori laughed.

“Ha ha.”

She did not know what was funny.

She simply knew that not knowing was the right answer.

“Ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! I see, I see. That would be right for you. Yes. Yes, it would. *That incident never actually happened.* …I did wield my power in the past, I did target Jinnai Shinobu-kun’s life, and you did stop me. But it was not a child organ trafficking Package. *It was an entirely different Package,* wasn’t it?”

“Are you only here to ask the obvious? To be honest, I’m a little displeased that you’re still around.”

“Ha ha. Now, now. That was a surprisingly important question.”

The Aburatori laughed in absolute pleasure beyond the one-eyed hat.

“After all, I have surpassed the restrictions of time, so my power can interfere with both the past and the future. Technically, some humans assembled a Package to that end using my traits as a Youkai. Yes, as I’m sure you have guessed, I *snatched their organs* and took over the Package for myself.”

“…”

“Yes. I was first observed in a mountain village of Tohoku during the Meiji period, remember? I would elusively abduct and elusively kill. It seems my trait of killing without anyone ever seeing me was interpreted as teleportation or time travel. Did they call it the theory of relativity? Well, I don’t understand all the tricky details about time and space and whatnot, but those humans constructed a technique to that end.”

“Enough bragging.” The Zashiki Warashi silently approached.

“What are you after? I know you’ll only think about using this new technique to kill.”

“True. My first thought was to ‘harvest’ all the adults and old people back when they were young and at their most delicious. But when I thought about it more, I began to wonder if I could have even more fun with this.”

“In other words, you found something even nastier to do? And it involves contacting me?”

“Calm down,” said the Aburatori. “This should be quite obvious. I have surpassed time and space, so you might think there is nothing I can’t do, but there is still something impossible for me. Has it come to you yet? It is your specialty, after all.”

“…”

“You don’t want to answer? Yes, that’s it. That’s exactly it. Even if I can surpass time and space, I cannot fight unavoidable destruction. Let’s say a giant meteor is going to hit in three days. What can I do? No matter how far back in time I go, I cannot change its course. And even if I escape to the future, I will only find an ice age after the destruction is over. And even if I try to escape through space, I have no guarantee there are any other planets as comfortable as Earth. See? I am still fragile. I may control time and space, but I am powerless in the face of overwhelming destiny. I am wholly powerless and that is terribly frustrating.”

However, he knew of someone with the power to oppose destiny.

He had seen it for himself just once.

“*I want your power.*” The monster licked his lips. “I want the power to not only bend destiny in my favor, but to create entirely new destinies.”

“Sorry, but I’m just a pile of junk now. You won’t find anything inside me.”

“I am well aware. And while those alterations were made by Hyakki Yakou, they have deteriorated quite a bit in the last century. Perhaps you could say they have been tainted by modern culture, but whatever the reason, I can no longer find the same level of skill there. Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi has been completely lost.”

And so…

“I will change the past. *I will capture you during that fight before you were broken.* That will truly perfect me. I will hold time, space, and destiny in my hands and I will become a being with no enemies.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Probably. I have repeated that fight fifteen thousand times now, but I always lose to you in some way or another. …But by redubbing that day again and again, the historical data has been torn to shreds. Before long – probably only two or three more overwrites – it will be unrepairable. Fact and fiction will mix together and I will have free control over the record of who won that fight. That is when it all begins and when it all ends. That is when I will gain everything I desire.”

“…”

“Now, how about I repeat the question? The meaningless dubbing will deteriorate the medium of your memories.”

If the Aburatori’s loss there was overturned, the Zashiki Warashi would have been unable to save the young Jinnai Shinobu in that past incident.

“I haven’t seen you since that incident, that child organ trafficking Package that was unleashed here in Noukotsu Village. You must remember. So how has Jinnai Shinobu-kun been since then?”

If she had not saved him, what would have happened to him?

How had the *actual* incident with the Aburatori ended?

“I haven’t seen you since that incident, that child organ trafficking Package that was unleashed here in Noukotsu Village. You must remember. So how has Jinnai Shinobu-kun been since then?”

…………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………

Part 7 (Jinnai Shinobu)

And…

The Zashiki Warashi in the red yukata suddenly vanished.

Part 8 (Jinnai Shinobu)

I ran through every inch of the Intellectual Village searching for her.

I even asked the Umbrella Obake and Lantern Obake I found on one farm road.

But even after all that, I couldn’t find a single clue.

A few days had passed and there was still no sign of that showy Zashiki Warashi.

Had she left the village?

Would she never return again?

It was all so sudden that it all felt unreal even as I took my body through the actions of searching for her. The adults seemed to have completely given up. I had heard a house would soon fall into decline when its Zashiki Warashi left, but that probably had nothing to do with this. That selfish Zashiki Warashi would never have stayed in a house filled with people who cared about that.

On the first day, I started searching after school. It was only when I found nothing that I realized how serious this was. On the second day, I skipped school to search. My dad found out and hit me, but I could hardly worry about school on the third day either.

What was this?

What in the hell was going on?

There had been no signs or omens leading up to it. Or at least, I hadn’t noticed any. She had always been mischievous, but perhaps as a trait of her species, she had never run away from home before. That gave me no way of predicting what that glamorous Youkai was doing. Had she voluntarily disappeared or had someone taken her away? I didn’t even know that.

It reminded me of the people who were spirited away in an older age.

It was no laughing matter when it happened to a Youkai. It did seem like just the silly thing that would happen to that lazy Youkai, though.

“No good today, either.”

The third day of searching was another failure. I reached that conclusion after eight in the evening. Not only had I skipped school, but I hadn’t shown up for dinner either, so it was possible my dad and grandpa would be mad enough to throw me in the storage shed. It pained me, but I couldn’t have my mobility cut off like that.

I felt like I would go crazy if I didn’t think about it that way.

I felt an urge to tear at my hair and scream, but I somehow managed to force it down and started back toward the thatch-roof house.

But then a call arrived at the cellphone in my pocket.

“Uncle?”

“Oh, damn! So it finally got through. I’ve been calling and calling for three days now!”

“Three days?”

I had skipped school to run around looking for that troublesome Youkai. If he had really been calling that much, there was no way I wouldn’t have noticed.

“No, it makes sense that you wouldn’t know. I can’t even predict how long this call will last, so I’ll just get down to business. Shinobu, you’re probably the only one who can resolve this.”

“What are you talking about, uncle?”

“The Aburatori.”

I felt like an unpleasant squeezing sound came from my heart when I heard that.

That name…

“He’s gained immense power by taking advantage of a Package built around him. However, there’s still no sign of him doing anything in the open despite gaining so much power. There must be something there. As far as I know, that Zashiki Warashi is the only one to ever drive away that Youkai. That means she’s hiding even more power than him. I don’t know what that power is, but it’s most likely the ‘next step’ that the Aburatori wants more than anything else!!”

Part 9 (Uchimaku Hayabusa)

The static was terrible.

I wasn't sure how much of it – if any – was getting through.

I stood in front of Odaiba's Hachi TV in Tokyo. After hearing the details from the mystery freak, I had been visiting here quite a bit. I was meeting with Atou Minori-san who had once been my upperclassman and was now an assistant producer for a TV show.

As students, we had both pursued an Aburatori incident in our Intellectual Village.

We had been periodically comparing our memories of that incident.

At first, our memories had matched.

But…

"Huh? Was that what it was? Oh, right, right. Now that you mention it, it was."

It happened bit by bit.

"No, it was a child organ trafficking Package, wasn't it? Y'know, it used that diet boom and the fake online store to sell those colorful skewers. And your nephew, Shinobu-kun, got wrapped up in it."

I could tell it was changing day by day.

My former upperclassman's memories of the incident were clearly being overwritten by someone. And little by little, the overwritten memories were sounding less and less out of place to me. I was beginning to wonder if my memories of the "actual incident" were wrong.

"I have no way of checking," the mystery freak had said. "But it might be more than just that one incident. He may have experimented on other incidents before getting to the crucial one. We were involved with an Aburatori in that Tarot Girls 22 incident, remember? But *did that really happen the way we remember it?*"

Memories of the past were meaningless if the person telling you about them was lying.

The same was true if the information they were working from could be a lie.

When the mystery freak had put herself under “protective custody” to contact me, Chief Superintendent Mishima had called it “help that comes at a loss”. That had not simply been due to my relationship with the mystery freak. It might also have been due to my nephew Shinobu and that Zashiki Warashi.

“Shinobu, we don’t know the details yet, but the mystery freak got some information while partially infiltrating the criminal group. It seems the original Package involved altering photos to create a foothold for influencing the past.”

“Ksssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

“In other words, a photo that acts as evidence of what happened in the past has a specific individual added in *to actually put that individual in that time period.* In other words, it was a time travel Package.”

“Ksssssssssssssssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.”

“He can travel to a past era by altering photographs. It doesn’t matter if they’re in your phone’s image folder or your house’s closet, just be careful about photographs!! You might find something odd in one of them!!”

The mystery freak frowned next to me.

“Are you really getting through? That’s a lot of static.”

“I don’t know!! But it never even connected before. I can only repeat myself again and again and pray it gets through to him at least in part!! Shinobu! Hey, can you hear me, Shinobu!?”

Part 10 (Hishigami Mai)

“The analysis of all the Buddhist ritual items scattered within Accelerator Village is done. Yeah, it was just as I thought. It was a time travel Package using the Aburatori’s elusive nature. The world really is done for now that a single Youkai has taken that over. This is more dangerous than having nuclear launch codes stolen.”

It was in a city.

Someone had removed all the seats from a giant tour bus and completely remade it into an RV. The man who owned it was known as the Supplier and he could apparently survive even if a giant meteor hit the earth.

Incidentally, I had hired that indoor man to handle the analysis, but he had been trembling in a corner of the RV ever since he realized what the Package was. As I spoke over my satellite phone, he was covering his ears with his hands as if to say “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to be a part of this.” The Sunekosuri was trying to comfort him, but that seemed like a fatal mistake for someone working in this underground business.

I was using the phone to speak with the young lady of about ten who led Hyakki Yakou.

She sounded quite concerned.

“We have looked though our records of past incidents involving an Aburatori or a Package using its traits.”

“Did you find anything?”

“We were nearly rendered unable to check the records due to a cognitive distortion. Without our Venom Clairvoyant, we probably would not have noticed anything was wrong.”

“Oh, you mean that black-haired blindfolded shrine maiden who ranks in your top five?”

“The worst cognitive distortion is focused on Noukotsu Village in mid-March ten years ago. Surprisingly, there are traces indicating it is related to Jinnai Shinobu and that Zashiki Warashi.”

“Wow. It’s funny how you sometimes find people who get caught up in all sorts of things despite having no real power. Although I’d always thought that was more my sister’s territory with closed-room murders and the like.”

“There are even traces of Ver. 39 being partially used. It’s a complete mystery how we overlooked it until now. She was being treated as an escapee at the time, so there should have even been a specialized search unit.”

“True.”

I decided to stay quiet on that one. Ten years before was a peaceful time when her parents controlled Hyakki Yakou. It was also the time when an assassination plot was secretly prepared over the course of several years like termites eating away at the organization. It was possible some dangerous internal elements had hidden that valuable information.

“Anyway, is this really so bad you had to bring out one of your top five?”

“The cognitive distortion suggests that the Aburatori has at least begun to alter the past. Even the Venom Clairvoyant is having trouble predicting how long the past will hold up.”

“By the way, do you happen to know any way of directly attacking the past?”

“*We have two or three in stock,* but none of them made it past the prototype phase and are unstable. We intend to solve this problem, but we cannot deny there is a danger this will destroy a layer. No, it is almost guaranteed to.”

Ugh.

The fact that she actually did know of some showed that they really were the nation’s most powerful organization, even if they had declined some.

“Some are saying the safest bet would be to perform an air strike on Noukotsu Village, the singularity at the center of the problem, but I am currently holding them off.”

“I guessed you would. The timeline is completely distorted there. It’s possible you might not even find Jinnai Shinobu and the others even if you searched all through the village. Even if you bombed the village off the face of the earth, it might not destroy the root cause, so it's a waste of effort."

"That is why I am stopping them. But that means…"

"As a professional, it pains me to say it, but we have no choice but to rely on an amateur like Jinnai Shinobu-kun."

Part 11 (Jinnai Shinobu)

My uncle called out to me again and again, but his voice was perfectly clear.

It seemed like my voice wasn't reaching him, though.

The Aburatori.

A time travel Package.

A deadly Youkai had gained so much power and was now targeting that Zashiki Warashi to gain even more power.

"A photo."

My uncle was repeating the same thing over and over, so it would be difficult to communicate any further. I felt bad, but I ended the call to do something else.

"An altered photo!! The key to the time travel is a photo with the Aburatori added in!?"

What does it mean that the Zashiki Warashi has vanished?

Has she been sent to the past? Or has something happened to her in the past so she's been wiped from the pres-…

No.

I don't even want to think about that possibility!!

"Whatever the case, I need to find that photo. The altered photo is the source of all this, so I might find a way to solve this if I find it."

I ran full speed through the night and to the thatch-roof house.

I ignored the surprised cries from my parents and pulled out everything that held photos: albums, digital photo frames, computer folders, etc. I looked through them all, but nothing looked out of place. I even asked my parents so I could check their computers as well. I must not have chosen the best way to ask because both my dad and grandpa hit me, but when I kept asking, they reluctantly agreed.

But even after all that, I found nothing.

That only left the Zashiki Warashi's computer and smartphone.

However, I didn't know the password for the computer and the smartphone had vanished along with her, so I couldn't check either.

Was I stuck?

Or was I thinking about this wrong?

My uncle had mentioned photos, but did it not have to be ones from my house?

“Honestly, what are you doing? Stop worrying the old lady with your bizarre behavior.”

The annoyed Nekomata spoke to me, so I discussed the situation with her and she sounded even more annoyed.

“So that means the Aburatori can travel to a past era by altering a photograph?”

“Simply put, yes.”

“Then why would he rely on an album that is subject to someone else's tastes? He would use a system that more evenly and generally takes photographs over a constant time and place. That would be a lot more convenient for time travel.”

“But he's apparently trying to mess with the Zashiki Warashi and my past, so wouldn't he want some records connected to us?”

“He gained this time travel ability by hijacking a Package some humans created, didn't he? Why would those original humans assemble the Package based on your albums?”

Now that you mention it…

“But then what cameras or photos would they use?”

“They're everywhere.” The Nekomata used her front paw to point left, right, and everywhere else. “Aren't Intellectual Villages monitored by countless cameras to prevent crop thieves?”

My breathing really did stop for just a moment.

If the Aburatori had a technique to interfere with and alter such a massive system, the level of the threat shot up. After all, that would allow him to move to whatever time and place he liked within Japan.

But at the same time, something bothered me.

My uncle was a police detective and the police did not take action unless a crime was being committed. Time travel was an unprecedented incident, but there were no laws to punish it. It was "unprecedented" so that was only natural. In that case, my uncle had to have reached this time travel incident while pursuing some other incident.

For example, a crime related to a network.

If that was true, it supported the Nekomata's theory.

Where and how had my uncle gotten this information? If I knew that, would it help give me a clue?

"Dammit. It's no use. And he only just called me!"

The call wouldn't go through. This was rare for an Intellectual Village with a perfect net environment. In fact, it made me worry about him.

But if I couldn't check via my uncle…

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll use whatever's available to me."

With that answer, I called another number stored on my phone.

This one connected me to Madoka-chan, my class's eccentric beauty.

"Hi there. What is it, Shinobu-kun?"

"Thank goodness the call got through. Are the communications working as long as it's within the village?"

"Wait just a second! What's this about communications not working? That is *not* good. If it effects my stock trading, this could be serious."

"Um, doesn't the whatever-it's-called market close at night?"

"And what time is it in New York right now? And London?"

From the sound of it, Madoka wasn't having any issues. Did that mean my uncle was in some complicated place or did it mean it was centered on me specifically?

"It doesn't matter. Anyway, Madoka, you hire a bunch of armed guards, don't you? Have you heard of any trouble with the security camera network? Like someone hacking in from outside?"

"Oh, how timely. But it's actually about a conflict between online services, not hacking. A notification message from a major SNS and the automatic backup service sending the village's camera footage to the backup server conflicted with each other. It apparently caused the system to freeze temporarily."

"Freeze?"

"It apparently did a lot of damage on the SNS end. While the security programs were locked up, it seems someone stole quite a few IDs. Do you know what an abandoned account is? That's an account that hasn't been used in over a year and even the owner has probably forgotten the password. It seems someone has taken over those accounts and is posting all sorts of things, both true and not."

"Did some hackers cause that major freeze?"

"It's hard to say. The trouble occurred as soon as the security company added in a new backup storage service, so at first, it felt more like an accident."

"What kinds of things are being posted?"

"As I said, all sorts of things. The most noticeable ones are those influencing stock prices or raising futures prices for brand-name crops. That's why an arrest warrant was put out. …But it's strange. I don't know if some software is editing the date or what, but entries are being added in for five or even ten years ago. Something about *seeing a dangerous Youkai.*"

The time travel Package altered past photographs to make an individual actually exist in that era.

Was this an example of that?

If so…

“You said the freeze happened because two large systems came into conflict. That was used to attack the SNS, but what about the other side? Was the security camera network attacked too?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t look like anyone took control of the cameras, but it will take time to check the recorded footage. There’s just so much of it that it isn’t easy to check for traces of deletions or alterations. It does seem there aren’t any traces of massive amounts of data being moved around, though.”

This meant the Nekomata had been more or less spot on.

The security camera footage had been altered and fictional entries had been posted on that SNS to create witness accounts.

In this day and age, people relied on online data more than their own memories.

When people didn’t know how to write a difficult kanji, they would check an online dictionary for the answer. Even if it wasn’t quite how they remembered it, it wasn’t uncommon for them to generally assume the dictionary was right and correct the information in their own head.

And this went beyond mere knowledge.

If an altered photo with a date from ten years ago was slipped into your computer or home server’s electronic album, you might very well assume it must have happened and alter your own memories.

People’s memories – and thus the truth – could be edited by a third party these days.

“Enbi mentioned an incident like this before. Two Packages came into conflict and went out of control.”

“Just hearing that isn’t enough to know what you mean.”

The Aburatori could travel to any time period using false photos and witness accounts.

A monster like this couldn’t be defeated by clenching your fist and punching it.

What was I supposed to do?

If I didn't prepare some kind of trick, I wouldn't even be able to stand on the final stage.

"Madoka, can I ask a favor?"

"You already are, but what is it?"

"Since you know about the conflict between the SNS and the security camera network, your armed guards must have been directly affected, right? I need you to use that connection."

After I finished asking my "favor", I ended the call.

The Nekomata looked up at me while lying on the tatami mats.

"Mess this up and you're dead."

"Perhaps."

"For one thing, why is a human even trying to pick a fight with a deadly Youkai? You do understand that no Youkai can be killed by normal means, right?"

"But it's worth trying. Or at least, I think it is."

Hearing that, the Nekomata slowly moved as if letting me past.

I left the room, ran down the hallway, and made my way to the entrance so I could enter the night once more.

But on the way, I found a small form sitting politely at the end of the dark hallway. It was a girl with long bluish hair and a white kimono.

She was simply there and she blocked my way as a part of the usual scenery.

She gave off the intimidation of a border god that prevented disaster from entering a village.

I spoke her name without thinking.

"Yuki Onna."

"I need to speak with you."

She replied with a dreadfully icy voice that gave a glimpse of her true characteristic.

She most likely knew where I was going and why. She knew that, but she was stopping me.

She was warning me just how dangerous it was.

She was telling me that facing this Aburatori was different from the previous Packages and that I was crossing a line.

But…

“Please sit.”

“No, Yuki Onna. I don’t have time to speak with you right now. If I’m too late here…if I’m even a second too late, it will all-…”

“Sit.”

That one word was all it took for my knees to give out. All strength left my legs. My entire body fell straight down like a spring being pressed down or a transforming toy created to move like that.

I was forced to obey her and enter a similar sitting position to her.

“Wha-…?”

I tried to speak in surprise and protest, but I realized I could not even do that. My teeth chattered and I could not properly move my tongue, lips, or throat.

Is this…the cold?

Is my body so messed up that I can’t even tell that!?

“I have lowered your body temperature by approximately two degrees.”

The Yuki Onna silently narrowed her eyes and spoke calmly.

“Welcome to the world of hypothermia. When stranded on a snowy mountain, this is the beginning of your fear. Your temperature is currently thirty four degrees. If I lower it by another four degrees, you are almost 100% guaranteed to lose your life. Did you know that?”

"Yu…ki…On…na…!!"

"Does this seem unreasonable?"

A dry sound burst from the wood surrounding her.

As she sat there, she looked like a giant boulder blocking the sole path back to civilization.

"But that is how Youkai work. You have resolved a few incidents involving Packages, but *that is not the same as defeating the Youkai themselves*. You do not seem to understand that, so I thought I would give you some advice."

As I collapsed, the Nekomata gave a sharp hiss to threaten her.

It sounded more like a snake than a cat.

However, the Yuki Onna was unfazed. In fact, she turned a sticky gaze toward that small form.

"I will not spoil him as much as you, nor will I treat him as carelessly as you. At this rate, he will almost certainly die. Letting him continue while knowing that goes beyond letting him die. It is blasphemy."

My heart hurt.

Intense pain came from the center of my chest as if my organs were being squeezed.

Had my temperature dropped even further?

"Frankly speaking, the Packages humans create are clever, but even another human can destroy them if they know how they work. It's logical that humans can destroy what humans made. But that rule does not apply when directly fighting a Youkai."

It no longer felt like I was confronting the single Youkai called the Yuki Onna.

This was a queen's territory.

The entire frozen world was coming to crush a single human.

"Humans can explain how fish live in the water and how birds fly through the sky, but that does not mean they can defeat a fish or a bird in an actual competition. Explaining how it works only reveals that you have no way to win. …Similarly, your previous methods will not work against this Aburatori. *If you think you can win simply by revealing his trick, you are 100% guaranteed to die.* Do you understand that?”

Were all Youkai like this?

Were they this far removed from humanity just because they were a deadly Youkai?

“Oh…ah…”

I tried to reply, but my lips wouldn’t move.

My vision shook, blurred, and sank into darkness. A moment later, I could no longer distinguish between front, back, left, or right. I wasn’t even sure if I was seeing reality or an illusion brought on by the cold.

All I could see was a vast darkness I couldn’t focus on.

Beyond it was a pair of glittering golden eyes.

The color of those eyes stabbed into my consciousness to an odd extent.

“I have…a chance. Not even I am about to make a suicidal attack here.”

Like surpassing numbness and losing all sense of feeling, I stopped feeling the cold tearing at my skin at a point. Oddly enough, it almost felt like soaking in lukewarm water.

At the same time, I managed to speak.

I wasn’t confident I was actually getting the words out in reality, though.

It wouldn’t have surprised me if I had already passed out and this was just a dream.

Deep in the darkness, the golden eyes spoke.

“That chance is an illusion. Following it will not allow you to defeat the Aburatori.”

“That’s not true.”

“No matter what you may have built up in your head, you do not have the physical ability to pull it off. Even if it is theoretically possible to run on water, your actual body will be unable to keep up and you will sink. A human is nothing more than a fragile container.”

“I can’t know that…until I try.”

“No matter what plan you might have, you will drown if you challenge a fish and you will fall to your death if you challenge a bird. …I am not arguing against what may be in your head. I am not saying you lack the brains needed. I am saying just having the brains is not enough.”

“…”

It felt like time stretched out infinitely.

Or perhaps it was already over and I just hadn’t realized it yet.

“What do you have beyond your brains? What specific ability do you have to compare to a fish’s gills or a bird’s wings? I want you to show me. My supernatural ability is much more popular and closer to a physical phenomenon than the Aburatori’s. That makes it a good test, don’t you think?”

At that point, the core of my mind grew much clearer.

“That’s not what this is.”

“How so?”

“While dragging the conversation on and making me worry, you’re continuing to lower my temperature. You were planning to end it all here from the beginning.”

I heard a small sound.

Was it a laugh? Yes, the golden eyes were laughing from the darkness.

“*And what is wrong with that?*”

“……………………………………………………………………………………

I heard a creaking sound.

It was not the sound of an explosive revolution in my muscles. I had not removed some limiter in my head to achieve the ridiculous strength some people gain in a fire. My body was still a human one. No power of friendship or hard work had burst out to increase my potential five or ten times over.

Most likely, the cold had simply caused the house to creak.

But oddly enough, I took an unsteady step forward at that same instant.

I had realized something then.

That bizarre world of golden eyes floating in the darkness was not an illusion or a dream. The darkness did not stretch on without end and the golden eyes were not a vague monster.

I was still inside the thatch-roof house I had been born and raised in and the Yuki Onna sat only a few steps ahead.

If I could walk, I could reach her. There was a goal.

To keep me from noticing that simple fact, she had used the cold to rob me of my senses and judgment and she had trapped me in a labyrinth of my own creation. And she had done it slowly and carefully *as if to safely freeze my body.*

And with that realization, the very brains she had rejected returned definite strength to my body.

“There’s one thing I want to ask you.”

“What is that?”

I took a step.

“If I give up here, who can save that indoor Youkai? Can you or the Nekomata defeat that Aburatori?”

“I seriously doubt it. We could kill him in a direct confrontation, but his very existence is too elusive. He can attack us whenever he likes, but it would be rare indeed for us to find him. So if he focuses on fleeing, it would be difficult for even a deadly Youkai to kill him.”

I took a second step.

“Then leave it to me. Don’t crush other people’s possibilities just because you can’t do it!! And if he’s that dangerous, that’s all the more reason to go. I’m not going to back off because he’s dangerous. If he’s dangerous, it means I have to go save that Zashiki Warashi even if it’s reckless!!”

“Humans and Youkai are different. Is she truly that important? Having her around might be nice, but you can live without her. You would have to be insane to risk your life for something like that.”

I took a third step.

“You always act like family because we live in the same house, but when it comes down to it, you’re saying to abandon her because she’s a different species? She’s more important than that!! She’s been a part of my life from the moment I was born. In fact, she’s probably been a part of it since before that. I can’t back down here!! Whether it’s an Aburatori or whatever else, I’m not letting some bastard show up now and steal half of my life from me!!!!”

“…”

I took a fourth step.

I suddenly realized the golden eyes were directly in front of me.

I slowly stretched out my arm which was shaking uncontrollably.

The palm touched something and that slight sensation brought reality rushing back. Like a receding wave, the world of darkness returned to the familiar entranceway.

The sudden cold that had assaulted my entire body completely vanished.

My hand was placed on top of the Yuki Onna’s head as she continued to sit.

“Don’t worry.”

She remained perfectly motionless, so I spoke to her.

“I’ll be fine. This Aburatori isn’t a normal Youkai. He’s not your average deadly Youkai. He’s a cruel being that was born to kill, enjoys killing, and leaves behind nothing but killing. But I have a chance even then.”

“…”

Humans could not defeat Youkai.

I agreed with that. It did not even have to be a deadly Youkai. In a serious fight, I probably couldn’t even defeat a Zashiki Warashi or Umbrella Obake. If you still wanted to defeat them, you had to work to transcend the framework of humanity like Hyakki Yakou did. But this Aburatori was not in a normal state right now. He had transcended the framework of Youkai with human help, so the otherwise solid rule that humans could not defeat Youkai was beginning to crumble.

And so…

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure I come back.”

With that, the Yuki Onna truly fell silent.

She had been using harsh words and acting sharply to get me to stop, but all that clearly ended.

I removed my hand from her head.

I put on my shoes.

I opened the front door.

With each of those completely normal actions, I was approaching the Aburatori who had put the Zashiki Warashi in such danger. This was no different from approaching death. Most likely, the Yuki Onna and Nekomata could see the great danger much more clearly than I could.

But so what?

My goal wasn’t to approach that creepy Youkai or to be sucked into his world.

Nor was it to save the Zashiki Warashi with a one-way ticket.

My goal was to return here and rejoin the family and Youkai who had forgiven my selfishness. That was what I had to focus on as I ran forward.

Are you watching me from the depths of darkness and madness, Aburatori?

Well, sorry, but I’m not looking at you.

Part 12 (3rd person)

The Yuki Onna remained motionless for a while.

The door behind her had already opened and the boy had vanished into the dark night.

This time, it was not an illusion or lie.

He had entered a black world where true death awaited him.

“Don’t you want to watch him leave?”

She heard the annoyed voice of the deadly Nekomata who had been left behind with her.

“He’s already left. Just as you feared, this might be the last time you see him. This world is unbelievably dry and puny humans are easily killed. *I don’t think this is any time to be stubborn.*”

“…”

The Yuki Onna did not reply.

Her warning had not reached him.

No, it had reached him, but he had still left for the battlefield, saying he would rescue the Zashiki Warashi.

This was one result.

It confirmed a certain order of priority. It was a simple and cruel answer that tore a hole in a girl’s heart.

“That wasn’t fair.”

But she spoke quietly with her back still to the entrance.

“He shows me the answer, chooses his path, and gives me a clear sense of loss, but he still leaves a slight possibility that fills the hole in my heart.”

“Sigh. What are you talking about? Weren’t you looking at him? A kid with his hair dyed blonde who runs out into the night searching for a girl is obviously a lady-killer. …Also, you were clearly unsure whether to stop him to protect or to kill him here so the Aburatori couldn’t. You just about lost sight of your original goal and gave into your desires.”

“Hmph.”

His final words had clearly been unnecessary.

If he had made her completely give up, it might have opened a different path, but that small bit of kindness had recaptured her with its massive pull.

She knew it was impossible.

She knew that, and yet…

“I hope he gets stabbed by a kitchen knife one day.”

“Yeah, but I hear he’s already been stabbed twice by a human girl, so I doubt even death would fix that side of him. He was stabbed in the side with a fruit knife and in the chest with a pair of scissors. He only survived the scissors because they were stationery scissors with a rounded tip, but he laughed and said he would’ve died had they been sewing scissors.”

“Damn him! I really need to give him a proper near-death experience!! I can put him into full cold sleep!!”

Part 13 (3rd person)

“It” stood in a place that once was.

The rural scenery resembled what any Japanese person held in their hearts as a sort of sacred ground. All of them were born in different parts of the country, but seeing a single photograph of that place would make them feel nostalgic.

“It” stood in an already harvested paddy field at night.

As if ignoring the weather radar and satellites, white snow poured down on this one isolated area. The area seemed to completely transcend the timeline. The moon directly overhead was a full moon. Like a sun shower, the snowflakes falling from the night sky glittered bluish-white in the moonlight.

This was the scenery from that time and place.

This was the place where “it” could gain everything it had so longed for. Even with the ability to control time and space, there was something there that “it” desperately wanted.

“I see.”

“It” slowly exhaled.

The breath was not that of a wrinkled old man. It sounded more like the oddly charming breath of a young woman.

“So this is what it’s like.”

Ten seconds before, a sense of elation had filled “its” body, but that sense was already gone. Just like the hundredth or thousandth time hearing a great song, the impression it left faded. It had very nearly reached zero.

To gain this, “it” had eliminated as many obstacles as possible.

It had even restrained from killing.

Or at least, it had tried to. It was not confident how much it had succeeded. It had tried to restrain itself, but the number of deaths may not have changed much. All of its memories of past deaths were vague. That may have been one of its traits. If it could fulfill its desires with its memory of the killing, it would not need to kill someone new.

But whether that restraint meant anything or not, it was no longer necessary.

“It” had achieved its goal.

The sense of elation from that fact had vanished.

And that meant “it” would return to its normal territory.

Time, space, and destiny.

In the perfect place, at the perfect time, and with the perfect method, “it” would kill and kill until it had had more than its fill. There was no reason for that. It had always been said to kidnap children, remove their organs, cook them, and retrieve the oil, but no one knew why. But even though no one knew why it did any of that, people had believed that monster existed.

People did not look for a reason in a symbol of fear.

People simply feared the method.

“Now, it is about time.”

“It” gave a thin smile.

“I will spread fear with every method available to me.”

This monster had surpassed even the realm of Youkai and it was about to be released on the world.

But a moment before it did…

“Wait.”

An impossible voice slipped in.

The voice clearly did not fit that perfect scenery that looked like a hanafuda illustration.

Part 14 (Jinnai Shinobu)

To be honest, I didn't remember where I had run or how I had done it. If someone told me to do it again, I probably couldn't. In fact, I was born and raised in this village, but I had never before seen a place like this.

It may have been cut off from the rest of the world like a hidden village.

Or perhaps the terrain itself had formed a labyrinth.

I wasn't a specialist like Hishigami Mai or Hyakki Yakou, so I didn't know the answer. Fortunately, that didn't matter. What did matter was that I had made my way onto the final stage.

It was an unnaturally perfect paddy field of the kind any Japanese person could immediately picture in their mind.

It was a snowy landscape that completely ignored the current season and weather.

But the oddest thing of all was the Aburatori, that worst of the deadly Youkai standing in the center of the landscape.

"It" wore a conical hat with a large eye pattern that covered its head and face.

"It" was a woman with a glamorous figure and black hair that reached its ankles.

"It" was bewitchingly beautiful and wore a showy white yukata.
"It" was terribly twisted.

"It" retained some vestiges of that indoor Youkai which only made it creepier.

"Oh, now this is unusual."

The Youkai that everyone referred to as an Aburatori formed a definite smile on the mouth peeking out from below the brim of the one-eyed hat.

"Only those with the same sort of power as me should be able to reach this distorted place. But come to think of it, you are the one who that Zashiki Warashi directly saved. Perhaps you two were treated as antipodal singularities, just with one on the active end and the other on the passive end.”

“Antipodal singularities? I don’t know what that means, but are you sure you aren’t getting your terminology wrong?”

“Ha ha. As you can clearly see, I am an old-fashioned Youkai. I was merely using the general nuance of the terms. I don’t actually know anything about math or physics.”

The Aburatori stroked slender fingers across the brim of the one-eyed hat.

“So what brings you here today?”

“I’m here to take back what you stole.”

“Do you really think you can?”

“That doesn’t matter. Do *you* really think I made it all the way here just because ‘I can, so I might as well’?”

“I see. You say that like you loathe me. But really, you should be thanking me. Just as much as you should thank the Zashiki Warashi who once saved you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jinnai Shinobu-kun, I have continually rewritten a past incident to achieve my goal. I greatly altered the original incident to make it a child organ trafficking Package.”

The Aburatori smiled in absolute delight.

It was the look of someone tossing live fish into a pot and gradually raising the heat to cook them.

“So what do you think the ‘original incident’ was? Do you remember, Jinnai Shinobu-kun? *Do you remember just how you were torn to pieces?* Ha ha!! That is why you should thank me. It was truly and undeniably horrid. It was such an utterly and incomparably gruesome incident that the child organ trafficking Package seems like salvation in comparison. …It was so horrific that your Zashiki Warashi felt the need to alter destiny.”

“..

“Do you understand now?”

The Aburatori smiled and smiled and smiled even more.

“Besides, there is nothing you can do. Nothing at all. Things are already settled between us. And they are settled so perfectly that nothing would change even if we repeated this one hundred times. What can you change by working yourself up here?”

I heard what sounded like scraping metal.

The next thing I knew, the Aburatori held dozens of metal skewers spread out like a fan.

“Oh, I know. If you are that dissatisfied with the altered past, how about I show you just how you met your end back then? I can place the ingredients on the chopping black, explain the process a step at a time, and finally give you a live demonstration.”

The Aburatori’s white kimono shook as “it” approached.

I was frozen in place as if entranced.

As if this was a fixed match that “it” just wanted to get over with, the Aburatori slowly stabbed the metal skewer into my eyeba-

Part 15 (Jinnai Shinobu)

“Oh…”

In the instant, the sharp skewer was going to pierce my eyeball, the Aburatori stopped moving.

The slender female arm trembled unnaturally.

“What…? My…body… My…arm…won’t move?”

“Do you think it’s just your body?”

I did not take a single step away from the skewer positioned right in front of my eye.

The effects had shown themselves, so there was no more need to move back.

“Why…? The scenery…the snowy full moon…and the paddy field are…collapsing. They’re melting…away. Why is…the symbol of my power…the power to even…control destiny…melting away?”

Your own traits let you pass freely through time and space. And once you gained “something more” from the Zashiki Warashi, you probably thought you were a god or something. Not a Youkai, but a god.

But that’s not the case.

Every Youkai has their advantages and disadvantages. Advantages can sometimes be disadvantages and vice versa. I seriously doubt there’s some convenient “perfect trait” that’s not a plus or a minus.

On top of that, you forcibly boosted your traits with human techniques. Even if your power itself had grown to rival that of a god, it was still manipulated by imperfect humans at the foundation.

I never had to worry about an unreasonable battle against a pure Youkai like the Yuki Onna feared.

I just have to destroy the human techniques at the foundation.

I’ll make your structure come crashing down just like removing a stone wall from a giant castle!!

"You took over a time travel Package that let you move to any era by placing yourself inside altered photos from the past."

I quietly gave the answer.

"That made this easy. I just had to search through all the Intellectual Village security camera records you had targeted and delete all the image files you had altered. That erases the time travel. You used that to attack the Zashiki Warashi and steal her power in the past, so those events are erased too. *But wait, there's more.* Your entire existence is relying on those photographs right now, so as soon as they're all erased, your very existence is erased!!"

"Impossible… Impossible!! A mere high school boy could never search through and delete all of the video footage stored by a large corporation so quickly. Or are you claiming you are like a hacker from a movie!?"

"I'm not saying that," I spat out. "You broke through the security of a large SNS and a security company's video backup service by using the system malfunction when the SNS's notification message and the backup service came into conflict. But it seems the security company had only just started using a new net storage service. That makes things simple. The occult criminal group that assembled the Package already had someone inside the security company. You set up that large-scale freeze, didn't you?"

"…"

"That was the Achilles' heel. *I just had to make contact.* Madoka has a contract with them for armed guards, so I asked her to contact the employee who had introduced the new storage. He was probably being threatened in some gruesome way by a deadly Youkai called an Aburatori, but he just had to be told this was his final chance. He just had to know this was his last opportunity to cut all ties with the Aburatori!!"

"That…bastard…!!"

"That employee has access to the video footage in the new backup storage, so he can easily tell which photos have been altered. Then he just has to delete those photos. And it looks like he made it in time. You no longer exist in any era of this world!!"

The Aburatori tried to shout something, but instead, the beautiful female jaw fell completely off.

“You seemed mistaken about something, but you didn’t think I was here to fight you, did you? I’m only here because I don’t want that indoor Youkai to vanish along with you.”

The precipice of not being able to kill a Youkai with a blade or gun was gone.

The Aburatori was nothing more than a still-living rotting corpse that would fall apart and vanish.

“Did I… Did I really look like such a saint that I would laugh it off as you tried to hurt that good-for-nothing Youkai that’s been with me since I was born or even before? If so, I really am going to laugh.”

The Aburatori was rotting away, so even a normal high school boy’s arm could reach inside. That arm could break through, push through, and sink deep down to drag something out.

“I came here to rescue that Zashiki Warashi. I didn’t care in the slightest about you!!”

Without hesitation, I thrust my arm into the stomach of the beautiful woman in a white yukata. I felt my arm piercing into rotten flesh as it sank further in. Soon, my palm felt a much smoother sensation. I grabbed it and forcefully pulled.

I saw a red yukata.

I saw the same glamorous Zashiki Warashi I had seen ever since I was a kid.

At the same time, the Aburatori in the white yukata burst to pieces like a water balloon.

So did the unnaturally vivid rural scenery.

In that place where she had lost everything, the Zashiki Warashi slowly opened her eyes.

“I never once asked you to save me.”

“Oh, really? Well, I never expected any thanks from you.”

Part 16 (3rd person)

Why couldn't you tell I was being tsundere!? You idiot! You really are the worst!!

"H-huh? What???"

The day after the incident, Jinnai Shinobu finally returned to school after neatly settling the problem facing him. There, he learned the love he thought was over had not actually been over, but now it really had been destroyed beyond repair.

He returned to his thatch-roof house with a battered face, but the lazy Zashiki Warashi had no intention of giving someone in the family love advice.

"L-love? Eh heh heh. Are you asking about that despite knowing how jealous and particular about promises Yuki Onna are? I see, I see."

"This sounds like a job for the Succubus brand aphrodisiac! I can't guarantee what will happen to their personality afterwards, but they'll definitely be yours for the night!!"

To escape the Youkai and demon creeping up to him, Jinnai Shinobu ran from his home at full speed.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata watched him leave with a sigh.

Two things had happened shortly after that incident.

First, Jinnai Shinobu and the Zashiki Warashi had compared their memories.

No matter how many times they had spoken, both of them remembered a child organ trafficking Package using the traits of an Aburatori.

The Aburatori was gone, but it seemed the definitively damaged historical information was not going to return to normal.

That altered past had become fact.

The second was something Jinnai Shinobu was not aware of.

While walking through the village to return home after the incident, the Zashiki Warashi had parted ways with him.

She had not had any real reason.

She had simply watched him walk back home ahead of her.

She had not taken a step from that spot.

Finally, her body had shaken and she had collapsed to the small paved road.

"…Kh…"

While taken into the Aburatori and stored inside the Youkai's stomach, she had been able to hear what happened outside. She had heard what that worst of deadly Youkai had told him.

And she had heard what he had said.

"Did I… Did I really look such a saint that I would laugh it off as you tried to hurt that good-for-nothing Youkai that's been with me since I was born or even before? If so, I really am going to laugh."

His voice had been filled with hatred and hostility.

It was a voice she would never hear in that thatch-roof house.

"I came here to rescue that Zashiki Warashi. I didn't care in the slightest about you!!"

It had been a shock, like something had been terribly dirtied. The Zashiki Warashi had destroyed something that she could never make up for even with the infinite time given to her as an immortal Youkai.

"Uuh…"

A sob escaped her throat.

The Aburatori's inhuman actions had altered that past incident. All she could remember was the incident centered on a child organ trafficking Package and whatever the original incident had been was nowhere to be found.

But a fragment of a long-forgotten memory jabbed at her heart.

Long ago, in the maelstrom of the “original incident” before the past was altered, a young Jinnai Shinobu had met a Youkai visiting the village in the middle of a trip. It had been an Akaname. It was a harmless Youkai that licked up the filthy water left in the bathtub. However, it could give an unsanitary impression to others, so it was one of the few Youkai banned from the Jinnai household because they dealt in the production of drinks.

“It can’t be helped. My traits and your family’s situation just aren’t compatible.”

And the young Shinobu had immediately replied as follows.

“Then how about you play outside with me? Don’t worry. I can get along with any Youkai!”

Some tiny thread had snapped.

“Ahhh. Ahhhhhhh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

On that day, an incident came to its end.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata stared up into the still night sky.

And she cried like a small child.

Blank Space

A certain incident had ended.

However, that did not mean the deadly Youkai known as an Aburatori had been defeated.

“Bhah!!!???”

Like a stopped heart beginning to beat or a corpse having the breath of life blown into it, the beautiful woman in a white kimono let out a large breath. This happened below a metal bridge in rural western Tokyo where nature still remained. Like a heart massage, the vibrations of a train running by overhead shook the beautiful female body collapsed on the embankment.

“That was close. Far too close. If that had been my real body and not a copy I sent to the past, I really would have been in trouble. I would undoubtedly have been annihilated there.”

The “proper time” for the Youkai called an Aburatori was two days after the incident.

To someone who could freely move through time, the continuity of past, present, and future had grown thin. Having a past self injured did not necessarily mean receiving the injury in the present. The Aburatori would never die unless this “main body” was lost.

However…

(I did manage to extract the Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi by dragging it from the copy.)

A staticky noise filled the air.

The Aburatori blinked back and forth between being the beautiful woman in a white yukata and the wrinkled old man like a fluorescent light about to die.

(My power… I am losing the power to control destiny! Do I need to revisit that village and acquire it again!?)

A figure slowly approached the Aburatori.

The figure wore a white kimono and had long hair.

She was a female oni with bluish-white phosphorescence residing in the tip of the knife-like horn growing from her forehead.

“Hi there. You seem to have been spreading quite a lot of fear. You’re going to make me jealous like that.”

“An Aoandon? What is a newcomer like you doing here?”

“You say that, but the legend itself is actually pretty old. Of course, it is true I was only put together quite recently.”

This female oni called the Aoandon had been semi-automatically assembled in a certain incident centered on Four Mountains Village aka Zenmetsu Village. She was the Youkai said to appear once the Hyakumonogatari was completed in full. Unlike a normal deadly Youkai, her species had a unique trait.

The Aburatori who looked like a beautiful women tilted the head hidden by the conical hat with a single large eye symbol.

“Why are you here today?”

“Well, I’m currently gathering members. That’s why I’m here. I’m glad I only had to go to western Tokyo for that. The city center is just plain exhausting.”

“I see. So you want my help?”

“Hm?”

The Aoandon looked a bit taken aback.

“No, I have no need for trash like you.”

For an instant, the Aburatori could not understand what she had said.

And it happened a moment later.

“Gh…bh!?”

Blood rose in the Aburatori’s throat and quickly flowed out the Youkai’s mouth.

The Aoandon’s slim arm had pierced through the Aburatori’s chest.

Bluish-white phosphorescence continued to glow from the tip of the knife-like horn and her expression did not change much at all.

“While I am here to gather members, you are not my target. I suppose you could call this a small detour. I saw something I just couldn’t overlook, so I had no choice but to kill you. Troublesome, isn’t it?”

“Wh-what? Don’t tell me you are angry…that I am a Youkai that abducts and kills…human children? There is no need to follow…all of those ridiculous rules…humans have made…”

“No, this has nothing to do with the children. In fact, it’s almost always ignorant children who bother completing the troublesome Hyakumonogatari ritual. It would be silly of me to be angry about that.”

“Then…why?”

“Because there’s nothing new.”

The Aoandon erased all expression from her face and answered with scorn mixed into her voice.

“You gained the ability to freely control time, space, and destiny, but all you tried to do was kill children. That’s no different from before. …If you had tried to create a kingdom of only Youkai, annihilate the human race, or accomplish some other unprecedented challenge, I would have clapped my hands and helped you.”

“Ah…gh…”

“Did you just decide to relax because you have no concept of a lifespan and have infinite time to work with? But if you aren’t going to change, there’s no difference between existing and not existing. In that case, don’t keep living. Disappear. If you’re going to insult yourself, you deserve a suitable fate.”

“G…gah… gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

The Aburatori gave a blood-filled scream with an arm through the chest.

That deadly Youkai shaped like a beautiful woman in a white yukata produced dozens of metal skewers to eliminate the newcomer at close range.

However…

“I am a special deadly Youkai that rules over the Hyakumonogatari.”

The Aoandon did not bat an eye.

There was no need to move.

She had no connection to fate like the Zashiki Warashi or Jinnai Shinobu, so her fearsome level of power could be seen in the mere fact that she had managed to contact the Aburatori so easily.

The Aburatori was a special Youkai that could easily attack others but that others had an incredibly hard time contacting.

“I exist in the leftover space beyond the one hundred bloody ghost stories.”

The giant organization of Hyakki Yakou was named after a special concept. That concept was a strange phenomenon in which one hundred different species of Youkai would form a line and walk through the night. This Youkai had singlehandedly taken in one hundred ghost stories, so she had reached that same level on her own.

“You are no more than a single fear, so did you really think you could harm me?”

A young man changed trains and travelled to western Tokyo.

After crossing a giant metal bridge, the train arrived at a run-down station.

He left the ticket barrier and looked to the surrounding mountains. Even a small breath was enough to feel a green scent fill his lungs. He also saw a thick ocean of trees that anyone in an underground business would naturally imagine had a corpse or two buried in it. In fact, it had apparently been the stage of a recent incident involving Jinmensou.

He glanced at his cellphone.

The screen displayed a 1seg news broadcast. The crimes of a *large criminal organization* were coming to light and a lot of people had been arrested. Countless camera flashes filled the screen as a suspect with his coat over his head was taken into a car by the police.

The young man's eyes narrowed when he saw the large police officer.

It was Sotobori Gaku.

He was the child who had been at the scene when an old police detective had been killed. He had walked the opposite path of the young man who had been the assassin. The baton had been handed off. After confirming that, the young man who was known to some thugs as a fortuneteller switched off the 1seg TV.

He put away the phone and looked around once more. He carefully observed the series of mountains and focused on one mountain in particular. He continued on foot toward that green mountain. He left the asphalt road protected by a guardrail and made his way into that unexplored area thickly covered by trees and underbrush.

He reached a hand into his pocket, grasped something made of hard metal, and pulled out a small handgun.

That gun had once killed someone.

Everything was finished, so he would now die by that gun.

He had been planning this for a long time, so he did not hesitate. He grabbed the grip cover that was shaved down small enough for a child to hold and he pressed the muzzle against his temple. His expression did not change as he simply went through the motions.

However…

"Hi there. And hold on!"

An inappropriately cheerful female voice reached him.

The young man initially looked confused as he turned toward the voice.

He was approached by a female oni in a white kimono and with a knife-like horn growing from her forehead.

"I only took a quick detour! I'm not about to lose the whole reason I'm here for something like that. Please hear me out."

"What are you? A Youkai?"

"I am the Aoandon, the final boss. Nice to meetcha. Oh, and I know more or less what you've done. I thought it was interesting, so I decided to invite you to be one of my members. How about it?"

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say. I was just about to die."

"That's the thing." The Aoandon snapped her fingers. "It's too soon to die. Can you really say your revenge is complete?"

"…?"

"I mean, yes, you destroyed one of the four major networks. *Whether we're talking about the original incident or the one someone changed it to*, I don't think any secret leaders of the group escaped or anything. But still, is this really over just because you crushed a *large criminal organization*?"

"Get to the point."

"What caused it all in the first place?"

The Aoandon asked a gouging question with the innocence of a mischievous child.

"I'm pretty sure I know what you were thinking. Evil is running rampant, evil is stronger and that's why the powerless good was lost. That's why you made up for that lost good by destroying a great evil."

Her lips then formed the word "but" to reject all that.

"But I don't agree. It is because good is powerless that evil runs rampant and power gathers in evil. The *large criminal organization* was not the only cause of what you did as a child. If the old detective who was sacrificed had been stronger, it never would have happened. You would have been saved."

The young man then moved.

He removed the gun from his temple and pressed it against the center of the Aoandon's chest.

"Shut up."

"But you can't deny it."

The Aoandon was still smiling.

Her expression seemed to predict the destruction of whatever paranormal power might be contained within the bullet.

"I am a deadly Youkai that absolutely loathes stagnation and the status quo. So…so you see? If you wish to change the world, I will clap my hands and help. Your revenge will not end with only defeating evil. It will only come to an end once you exterminate that fragile good and replace it with powerful justice. That will get back at everything that led to your suffering."

"…"

"So what will you do? If you wish for stagnation and escape, that's fine. But you don't need to commit suicide. I'll kill you myself with an extra serving of contempt. Which would you prefer?"

"I see."

He had thought fewer people would end up like him if he destroyed that great evil. But he had been too naïve. If good remained weak, it would fall prey to something else eventually. His actions had changed nothing. He would have left behind a few pieces of self-satisfaction, but the cycle of tragedy would have continued.

"I understand your point and I admit it is at least more worthwhile than killing myself here. …So where do we start? After bragging like that, I assume you have some specific methodology in mind."

"Well…"

The Aoandon arbitrarily looked up into the heavens and raised her index finger.

"First, how about you tell me your name? I of course already know it, but I want to hear it from you."

"Saiki Kazu. I am a former assassin, former fortuneteller, and former suicidal man, but now I am simply unemployed."

Afterword

Volume 4!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This volume took the three chapters published in the magazine and added a final fourth chapter. For that reason, I wrote this to make sure you would be glad you bought the book in addition to the magazines.

That's how it gained this irregular structure. Those who have read the final fourth chapter should understand that it completely overturns the first three chapters.

This is straying from the main point a bit, but a few book titles were given in Chapter 1. Did you notice a common theme between them? It was how they gather one's interest with negative wordings in the title.

It might be easier to think of it as a business model of making people think they will come to harm by not knowing something rather than making them think they will gain money by knowing it. Because of the trick in Chapter 1, I added that kind of maliciousness into the information coming from the TV and radio as well. What did you think?

If you thought you might want to read a book like that if it existed, you may be a little susceptible to suggestion. If you analyze which title interested you the most, you might be able to find where that weakness lies.

An information society (and the leadership thereof) may bring the big city to mind, but I think the coincidental or intentional bias of information can be greater in rural areas where fewer TV channels and magazines are available. What do all of you think?

Also, any of you who noticed something off about the Major Arcana of tarot in Chapter 2 might be connoisseurs. We may simply call it all "tarot" but there a variety of different designs and ideologies hidden therein. If you're interested, why not look into it?

The Aburatori was the main focus of Volume 4. As mentioned in the novel, that Youkai does not have a moral like most ghost stories do, be it “don’t lie” or “treat your parents right”. He is an extremely unusual Youkai that simply kills and simply spreads fear. There is no way of avoiding him and there are no magic words. He first showed up during the Meiji period, so he may be closer to a modern urban legend than a “good old Youkai”. And of course, he is a Youkai created by viewing the perpetrator as a monster.

On the other hand, the Zashiki Warashi is another Youkai closely related with child killing. The Zashiki Warashi is like a collection of the children killed by their families during food shortages and it holds the position of the innocent victims who will continue protecting their families as guardian deities even after being killed.

This was perpetrator versus victim.

I came up with this story by thinking I could bring more focus on the titular Youkai by pitting her against another Youkai from Tohoku.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. I am very thankful for all their help, including help with the magazine serialization.

I must also thank the readers. The Zashiki Warashi was back in the spotlight for once, but how did you like it? I hope you will stick with me in the future too.

And I will end this here.

I just hope I can write a fifth volume.

The story has finally begun to move in a number of ways.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Translator's notes and references

Backward to Volume 3 Forward to Volume 5